

## Last night sipped the sunset, my hand in her hair

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# Last night sipped the sunset, my hand in her hair

by [Silberias](#)

## Summary

Alina cast an arch look at his flowers.

"Oksana picked those this morning for her Grace," she said, a hint of a tease in her words.

"I admit I did knick them from her parlor on my way here. It did not feel right to come without flowers."

Or: The Tsar tests his shadow summoner, and in response the Darkling makes an impulsive choice that changes the known world.

Or: Alina's perspective of being courted by and marrying the Darkling of Ravka

Or: Alina's eleven years of being the otkazat'sya wife of General Kirigan, the famed shadow summoner, and the revelation that she herself is a myth made flesh

## Notes

I've seen a few arranged marriage/marriage of convenience fics, which I adore, and I've seen quite a few "Alina does \_\_\_\_ before being discovered as the sun summoner," and I've seen a few "because Darkles needs an heir," fics....but none of them were my /fix/ as it were. So what do you do when you aren't getting the stories you want? You write your own!

Also you will tear "secretly devoted to Alina!Ivan" from my cold dead hands, right after you tear "heartrenders are loyal to the steadiest person in the room" headcanon out of them.

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

## Your embrace was all that I feared

Wond'ring aloud—  
How we feel today  
Last night sipped the sunset—  
My hand in her hair  
We are our own saviors  
As we start both our hearts beating life  
Into each other

Wond'ring aloud—  
Will the years treat us well  
As she floats in the kitchen  
I'm tasting the smell, yeah  
Of toast as the butter runs  
Then she comes, spilling crumbs on the bed  
And I shake my head

And it's only the giving  
That makes you what you are

- *Wond'ring Aloud, Jethro Tull*

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When Alina turned twenty she was still stuck in Keramzin for not even the army would take her. Her health was too delicate according to the stout conscription officer, basic training would kill her. Ana Kuya had tutted and gone to meet with Duke Keramazov, explaining that one of the orphans had no future—no suitor, no apprenticeship, and no enlistment papers. Together they came up with an arrangement where Alina would have a place at the Duke's manor until she was thirty. If she still didn't have a place to go by then, she would begin assisting Ana Kuya at the orphanage. She would be allowed to go if she were to find work elsewhere or if she married—or if the army suddenly reconsidered and wanted her after all. They all tacitly knew that these options were unlikely avenues for Alina for a number of reasons, and while it was nothing like the fearsome indentured servitude practiced in Ketterdam it was near enough in the exercise.

While watching Mal go off with the other new soldiers Alina did not hold out hope that she would escape her fate of eking out a life where she'd landed here in Keramzin.

Working for the Duke was pleasant enough, mostly, for she was in charge of his correspondence, his accounts, and teaching his children their letters and manners. A steward and a governess, rolled into one. His daughter she taught to draw, trying to be kinder than Ana Kuya had been to her, and his son she made write letters to the tenant farmers—though he was a hardy eleven he would take up his father's place in life soon enough and he would

need to know how to handle these affairs without going to the *orphanage marm* of all people.

The meals in the Duke's house were better, as were the blankets on the beds, but neither seemed to do much for Alina's health. She didn't put on weight, she didn't get more restful—or even *more*—sleep. The Duchess called her their little ghost, and none even frowned at the callousness of the nickname, for it was true. Alina was thin and gaunt, she had been since she was a child. Her sickly little body had been a cause for some excitement for the Grisha testers when she was ten, and their disappointment had been that much more palpable when she'd failed the test.

Her fortune changed greatly when the Duke unexpectedly hosted a coterie of high ranking Grisha from the Little Palace, including their infamous Black General. Alina was sitting on a stool in the herb garden, snipping flowers and leaves to dry for their medicine stores when she saw the group riding up the wide lane from the road. She'd only had time to stand and execute a respectful bow before they'd passed her on their way to the main entrance of the manor. None of them had given her a second look, she'd later protested to the lady's maid the Duchess sent to her bearing a few hand-me-down dresses so she could attend the formal dinners the Duke intended on treating his guests to. Alina's protests were drowned out and she was crammed into a rose colored gown that only looked decent on her because they'd let her put on her stays before tugging it over her head. There was nothing to be done for her hair so they left it loose, not caring to coax it into anything particularly special or even tying it back.

Even the best trained servants could not easily hide their disdain for their employer's half-Shu pet, it seemed, on a night when the cook was under scrutiny not to put anything untoward into the soup served to the Grisha. If Alina had been less incensed she might have laughed at it all, but as it was she only barely held herself in check because she knew how important events like this were. Everyone wanted to make a good impression on the Grisha, even Alina to some extent, because over the years many Grisha had been found in and around Keramzin. It was something the testers who had come when Alina was ten had said—there must be something in the water, to have such a steady appearance of Grisha powers in the population. It had perhaps doubled their disappointment when nothing had happened during Alina's own test. Despite her own failure, the steady appearance of Grisha meant that the testers were always generous with those who hosted them, and Alina knew for a fact that a not-insignificant portion of the orphanage's budget was made up of certain monetary gifts that came from the Little Palace. Alina had to appear at the Duke's table for that reason, for her livelihood and profession would depend on Grisha generosity as much as it would that of the Duke of Keramzin.

What none of them had known was that General Kirigan had been commanded by the new tsar to take a wife. Specifically an *otkazat'sya* wife, and that he'd been expressly forbidden from marrying a Grisha woman. Tsar Vasily was a young and nervous man but he knew his shadow summoner was rare, and he meant to try and ensure his children's children would have ready access to that kind of power. The tsar had not cared too awfully if his order caused offense, he had himself married as he'd been told to. General Kirigan, in his mind, was certainly able to do the same.

The general had been enraged, though he'd quickly directed his fury inward and given the tsar a gracious bow to acknowledge the order. He requested that he be given time to find such a wife as would tie herself to such an arrangement. Vasily hadn't seen anything amiss with the request and had given his permission and what he thought was a generous time-line of three months. Aleksander had given no further notice, though, of his departure plans. He'd left before the sun rose the next morning, accompanied by handful of his most loyal soldiers, heading in no particular direction until something pulled him towards Keramzin. He recalled that the duke there had inherited when the man's elder sister had been tested and found out as a tidemaker—something that the Duke had known acutely to be something in his favor and fortune with the lord of the Little Palace. It had the effect of making him always kind and accommodating to Grisha who passed through his holdings. Come to think of it, he mused as they ate up the leagues between Os Alta and Keramzin, the place seemed to always produce one or two Grisha every year. Perhaps that was why his mind turned there as a destination.

Aleksander as a man was immediately drawn to the young woman that the Duke was employing as half-steward-half-governess, Miss Starkov. *Alina*. She ate with the family at meals, though she did not spend much time actually eating any of the food. The young woman wasn't exactly demure and blushing, more introspective and cautious. Her limbs were thin, and she swam in the gowns she wore for the first few days before she seemed to find time to take them in—revealing just how waif-like she really was, though a dab hand at mending to be sure.

If anyone had seen her, had known that she of all people, would become his first and only choice of wife they would have scoffed, laughed even. Why choose a half-Shu orphan who looked wan and weak save for when she stood in the brightest sunlight, plucking her out of the household staff of the Duke of Keramzin? Why choose this woman when he could have had his choice of any number of lovely or more well-connected noblewomen of Os Alta that either pursued him or were pushed at him by calculating families? Perhaps her lack of expectations drove him, her lack of connections meaning he did not have to think back three generations to remember past grievances, her small window of the world a benefit when he would enclose her in the Little Palace far from adventures that she may have otherwise had. Her lack of immediate beauty made her a low-risk of being made a courtier at the grand palace, kept as a hostage and an amusement to the tsar when his eye wandered from his icy Fjerdan wife.

He sent inquiries first, of course, demanding proof of her failed Grisha test. He also had his companions meticulously learn of how she had come to be at the orphanage, her past, her friends, why she was here rather than anywhere else in the world. He would not give the tsar the least reason to take her away from him. The word he got back from the Little Palace thrilled him to the core, as did the research into her background in Keramzin.

Alina Starkov had been tested twice, once before being sent to the orphanage and again when she was ten. Rejected by the First Army as too frail. Left behind by a childhood sweetheart who could have easily married her when he'd been conscripted. Bound by a contract that seemed nearly straight out of Ketterdam in the narrow path it left her to walk.

Aleksander appropriated some of the Duchess' flowers from one of the sitting rooms—a bouquet of pink and yellow flowers—and went to Alina where she was mending young

Master Keramzin's trousers. The image of her, sitting in one of the bay windows in the sunlight, sent a twinge through him, remembering the last time he'd been married, the wife who had died well over a century ago. Kiske, a black skinned durast who had made him many tokens of affection through their lives together, many of which he still had. She had been purposefully barren but they had taken in three orphans to raise as their own. Her nimble fingers had mended and patched and hemmed all of their clothes at one point or another, the patches lasting longer than the garments themselves, sometimes.

"Miss Starkov?" she stilled and then looked up at him, her dark eyes flickering to the flowers he held and back to his face. A small smile briefly lit her face and absently Aleksander realized that he'd never married an otkazat'sya before.

"General Kirigan, welcome," she made to set aside her mending but stopped at his urging. It sat lifeless on her lap, though, untouched as she folded her hands to keep them still after she urged him to set next to her in the sunlit window. She had a shawl on, and her long sleeves were fastened securely at her wrists despite the warmth of the day and the heat of the sun through the window. Alina cast an arch look at his flowers.

"Oksana picked those this morning for her Grace," she said, a hint of a tease in her words.

"I admit I did knick them from her parlor on my way here. It did not feel right to come without flowers."

Alina's face shuttered a little, closing off from him, guessing better where this conversation was headed. Distantly Aleksander remembered the Duke's plans for her—she would have been within her rights to think he was coming to discuss the future orphanage as one professional to another. The madness that had seized him wouldn't allow for that, though, he had to have her if he could. It was irrational, but it would break him to leave her behind to wither away in Keramzin of all places.

"Have you always lived in Keramzin?"

Her fingers worried at her newly finished stitches on the abandoned sewing project, and her dark eyes avoided his. Aleksander couldn't tear his eyes from her delicate fingertips—delicate bones, delicate health. An otkazat'sya destined for a shorter life than most. Even aside from his mad impulse to have her, this was what he wanted, he resolutely told himself. Vasily would not be king forever, or even for long, surely she would outlive that horrid man.

"Since my parents died in the Fold. My—my uncle was with us, he was going to have us live with him near Os Alta. He was a cobbler who wanted my father to help him adapt a mechanical seamer for shoes. It seems a silly thing, but he got the idea from seeing the uniforms that are made west of the Fold." She took a shuddering breath, pushing away whatever clawed at her mind and looked up at Aleksander again, "only the squaller and I made it out. I had no other family, and I was not Grisha, so to the nearest orphanage I went. What—what about you, General? Have you always lived in the Little Palace?"

"No," he said, finding it surprisingly easy to fill the silence, "I hid from the testers until I was oh, fifteen I think. I lived...near the Fold, in a crumbling little farm with my mother, I didn't want to leave even while it made me sick. Eventually the testers, or the other children, will

find out though. Grisha powers never stay hidden for long.” It skated the truth so deftly that even the most skilled heartrender would have had trouble detecting even a whiff of a lie. He would be truthful with Alina as much as he could afford to, especially if it made her smile in that compassionate way she did when he finished speaking.

“I like irises,” Alina said eventually, having let the silence lap at them for a few moments, “the Duchess does not care one way or another save that I mustn’t plant blue flowers of any kind. It is a shame that’s where she draws the line, for blue irises are my favorites.”

“I prefer lilies,” Aleksander replied before he could stop himself, “white ones, newly opened.” Alina chuckled, a warm look flitting in her eyes as she took the bouquet from his nerveless fingers. He could already imagine that glance, teasing him across a room at some royal function or another where only she could read his thoughts or see the forced smile on his lips. A pity he would only have her for fifty years, he didn’t think he would ever grow tired of looks like that.

“Before I ask,” he murmured, so soft it was nearly a whisper, “do you in fact want to stay here? To run the orphanage?”

Alina turned her eyes to the flowers in her hands, fingers gentle on the petals before bringing the bouquet to her nose for a long moment. He wondered if she’d ever had anyone bring her flowers like this—the sweetness of getting flowers from a man hoping for her attention was either completely novel to her or even the greatest flirts of the Grand Palace paled in comparison to her wiles.

“No, I wanted to join the first army, to be with my friend Mal. That isn’t what the saints seem to have preferred for us, though.” He took in a loosely shaking breath, considering—he did not want to tie himself to a woman pining for another. He was yet a selfish creature and he wanted his partner to want him, to pine after *him*.

“Do you love him?” the answer to his question would determine her future and her pause, a full stilling of her body, showed that she was aware of the fact. Alina eyed the flowers in her hands, touching the petals again. Her nails were clean and meticulously trimmed, he noted, unable to tear his eyes from her hands. How beautiful those hands would have been summoning the wind or controlling the tide—instead she wielded pens and needles, changing the world around her in small, deliberate ways. The sun started to be uncomfortable where it beat down on his black kefta but Aleksander did not shift or show it on his face. Alina was gorgeous in the sunlight, it seemed to light her from within despite the layers she’d piled onto herself.

“If he had stayed, yes, or taken me with him. It would have been my death to try and be a camp follower, but I would have followed him if he’d asked. But,” she pulled a loose petal from one of the flowers and let it fall to her lap, “he didn’t stay. I made my peace with it, I answer his letters when he writes to his little friend from Keramzin, but I suppose I’ve been forced to be more practical since the First Army wouldn’t take me. We all have a history, General Kirigan, of paths taken and not taken.”

“Then will you come with me? Walk at my side for the time you have?” Alina dimmed for a moment at his words, understanding them before he had the chance to correct himself.

"I'm sorry I won't last into your old age," she said, setting the flowers on her lap and looking out of the window out into the fields. She left it unspoken that Grisha often avoided marrying otkazat'sya for many reasons, but that prematurely burying a spouse was definitely on the list.

"Don't be sorry for what you are, Alina," he managed to say, "the world will never accept the apology. I have lived long enough to know, trust me." She flickered back to life then, giving him a bright smile and taking up the bouquet again to press her nose to the blooms. He could barely summon the breath to ask her then, properly rather than dancing around the question as he had for the past half hour. She was lovely, in a way perhaps only someone already resigned to losing her would see.

"Marry me, Miss Starkov?"

"Only if you tell me your name. The one you are in your heart," she replied, "so that when I'm gone you'll know that for a little while you weren't alone, despite all of this Grisha nonsense." The demand took him aback and he had a moment of fear at the idea of lying to her. What could it hurt? He'd been vain with this identity, taking *Sergei Aleksander Kirigan* for his own, the second son named after the stillborn first son of Paval and Vira Kirigan.

"Aleksander, then, for you. It is what my mother called me when she would catch me stealing honey." Alina giggled a moment before schooling her face again. She whispered his name a few times before she grinned leaned across and kissed his cheek.

"I accept, Aleksander, but you must defend me from the Duchess' maids when you break the news to the family. It was a wrestling match straight out of a bar brawl when her Grace instructed them to make me presentable to her guests." Without his meaning to the image of Alina staring down maids used to having their own way filled his mind and he couldn't help the smile that touched his lips.

"Only if you protect me from that Ana Kuya woman who runs the orphanage," he said, just as flippant as she had been. Her energy was infectious.

"Deal," Alina said, sticking out her hand to shake on it. Her fingers were cool, no doubt due to poor circulation, for he was now fairly roasting in the sunlight of the window.

Again, Aleksander gave no possible ground for the tsar to get ahead of the game against him. He married Alina in the tiny chapel of Saint Michail of the Fields. He was gentle in his tones as he spoke his vow, and Alina's hands only quaked a moment when she slid the ring on his finger. She wore a blue dress given to her by the Duchess with a woman's riding cape over it for warmth. The riding cape was his gift to her, white with yellow flowers picked out with flecks of golden thread between the bright embroidery floss. All in all it was a patriotic *feeling* outfit, fitting for the wife of a military man but the gold flecks showed her to be the wife of an *important* man too.

"Well, Madam Kirigan?" he said, a smug grin playing on his lips as she finished signing the records books. One for the church and therefore the king, the other for the ducal archive of Keramzin. *Alina Starkov here this day takes the name, and all privileges associated, of her husband General S. A. Kirigan of the Ravkan Second Army. From this day her address and name shall be Madam Alina Kirigan.*

Alina quirked an eyebrow at him and took his arm. Behind them his lieutenant, Ivan, waited for the clerk to finish copying down the certificate and to apply the Duke's seal to it. Aleksander intended on having the certificate presented, along with copies of the failed Grisha tests and the rejection from the First Army, to the tsar in lieu of himself. Make Vasily call for him directly and with intention. He had asked his general to jump, but had failed to specify how high.

Later, after the sumptuous dinner provided by the Duke, they walked together to the room he'd been given on his arrival. Long before anyone here but he and his Grisha had known of his true mission. Long before he'd looked, really looked, at Alina. Something about her compelled him, even now that he had her.

"I never asked, but why your urgency?" her voice was soft but sure. Alina had steel in her soul, a common trait of orphans, but she did not use it often to cut or wound. He still felt her question like a surgeon's knife, direct and unwavering. Steel indeed.

"The new Tsar, Vasily, thought to control me by making me take a wife, to have little biddable shadow summoners to raise at the Grand Palace where he thought a wife of mine would prefer to live. He did not, however, specify a particular woman and I did not give him the chance to realize his error. I imagine he has regretted it since then, if he is wise."

Aleksander left it silent that he did not think his tsar to be very wise at all. It was obvious though that Alina understood him. She accepted his answer and went to the next question in her interrogation.

"Do you want children?" she asked as soon as the door shut to their chamber.

"Do you?" he tried to sound flippant but, glancing at her, it probably didn't work. He turned his attention to lighting the lamps, missing the steady glow of the fabrikator-made gas lights of the Little Palace, but glad to give his hands something to do.

"Not—not if they'll be used as pawns like you describe," she murmured behind him, stepping softly across the room to sit at the small vanity and starting to take her hair down. Aleksander watched her silently as the long, inky black locks came down and curled at her shoulders like living shadows before she quickly brushed them out with his mirrored brush and set to braiding her hair back into a utilitarian plait for the night. He swallowed words on the tip of his tongue—there were Grisha ways of staying barren, if one wanted to, but he didn't want to...tell her that. There would be plenty of servants she could ask, if she wanted that information. Instead he settled for something more reassuring.

"If there are—if we have any, if that's a blessing in store for us, I promise not to let that happen. Grisha or not, I promise," he managed to keep his voice even, though an underlying hardness seeped into it. A firm vow, more permanent than the one he'd given her earlier in the day. Alina met his eyes in the mirror and he crossed the room to her, laying a hand on her shoulder and holding her gaze in the reflection in the glass. She swallowed, shivering once as she put a hand over his. He felt a twinge in his gut at betraying her in that moment, sending an amplified call through where their skin touched. She looked so much like an inferni kept in some airless, tight room for so long—surely—but there was nothing. Aleksander had had to know, just—a third test, one she couldn't have expected and masked her way through, failed again. He let the call fade away, leaning forward instead to drop a kiss on her head.

"But all that can wait, my dear. Let us just sleep for now. In a few days we head back to Os Alta and we'll get you properly outfitted as Madam Kirigan," he forced his voice to brighten past his last disappointment, his only disappointment with his little wife, "sleep beside me tonight?"

Os Alta and the two palaces were abuzz with curiosity soon after their arrival two weeks later. Rumors abounded—the Darkling had married a Shu princess, or sold his hand to free some of his precious Grisha from Shu hands, or he had stolen a wife against the wishes of the tsar, or even that he had married a mistress of said tsar to keep her noble family happy or in line. The gossips were greatly taken aback on meeting Madam Kirigan. She was a wan little thing, half-Shu and seemingly half-starved, with a warm smile on her gaunt face, her hands delicate as a squaller's but without any Grisha magic pouring out of them. She was *sickly* too, confined often to her chambers for days or weeks on end. The Darkling demanded of the tsar, and was given without too much fuss, permission for her to miss attending court with the other wives and husbands of high ranking army officers. The tsar pouted but he'd gotten what he had wanted on the surface—his shadow summoner had married an otkazat'sya without complaint and was as attentive to the woman as he was to any of his Grisha. It wasn't spoken of by the tsar's advisers, but everyone knew that Madam Kirigan was unlikely to birth the next Master Kirigan which meant no toddling shadow summoners.

Where her physical appearance left many in askance, it was always an event when Madam Kirigan was well enough to attend court functions. She wore gem colored gowns as well as she did gowns the colors of flower petals or winter snows, and she looked powerful and serene in the black that her husband preferred. The sallowness that her chronic illnesses left on her cheeks seemed to fade away when she stood next to General Kirigan, her ink dark hair a perfect complement to his own. Even the courtiers who hated General Kirigan could not help but admit that they made a striking and perfect pair, dancing together at the balls and fetes held each year. Madam Kirigan was rarely seen by the court except for those events that various courtiers deemed worthy of attending. It was never worth the time of a nobly born lady to escort Grisha children around the Little Palace to their lessons, to play games with them, to sit with them when they were sick with toothaches or fevers or miserable with growing pains—but these places were where, when she was well enough, Madam Kirigan could be found. In these private spaces she was found wearing tightly laced boots, dark, practical trousers and suspenders, and a white or blue tunic with a black greatcoat flapping around her skinny body on even the hottest days, shepherding her little charges much as she'd once shepherded the Duke's children around Keramzin. She was one of very few otkazat'sya who owned clothing made of precious corecloth, the simplicity of her outfits belying how dear she was to her husband and his people.

Within three years the new children—the youngest near-infants to the eldest in their teens—called her Madraya when she read to them or soothed their aches or wiped their tears. In another three years she could tease a smile out of even the most dour heartrenders in her husband's service, something light and pleasing in her despite how stubbornly her otkazat'sya blood clung to her. Despite her frequent illnesses, she was as sturdy in her resolve as General Kirigan and nothing appealed to heartrenders more than resolve.

She never quickened with a child of her own, only seeming to grow more frail with each passing year, and while she never bemoaned the lack there was a certain hollowness to her as

time went on.

“Alina, let them see to you, please, my dear,” he begged her one night, shortly after their tenth wedding anniversary. He held her tightly while she shivered uncontrollably in his arms, seeming to freeze from the inside. Alina shook her head sternly, clenching her teeth to keep them from chattering. It was something she’d always steadfastly refused and he couldn’t bring himself to break her trust by physically forcing her to see a healer. She refused seeing them for any reason, preferring her herbal poultices and tinctures that she made herself—something about having seen too many healers, Grisha and otherwise, in her childhood and not wanting to burden the Grisha further with her weaknesses. Aleksander’s grief at her stubbornness was a living thing in his chest sometimes.

“My dear, please? Humor me, I am your husband, let me care for you. Let me help you,” they were skin to skin tonight, his shadows trapping all the heat into the room and keeping it close to where they huddled beneath thick blankets. The fire roared, obscured by the shadows, nearly too hot to stand. It reminded him of the blazing heat of his mother’s hut. That thought almost—*almost*—made something of itself before Alina spoke, breath shaking where it feathered on his skin.

“Sasha, please don’t worry. The Grisha healer that Ana Kuya bribed to see me told me when I was twelve—it’s because of when I was in the Fold. There is nothing to be done, just hold me,” so he did, clutching his little wife close, pressing a kiss to her shoulder, her neck, her jaw, her cheek, her brow. He wished, squeezing his eyes shut so tightly they ached, that he would not have to bury her, not so soon at least. He did not think she was being affected by the Fold, but unless she consented to seeing a healer he could not gainsay her. She had so little time compared to himself, he could not steal moments from her by subjecting them both to unhappiness—and it would break her heart for him to have a healer force their powers on her.

Another year went by, one that saw him bringing her with him when he could. Alina was not well, often finding it too painful to sit, to lay, to stand—comforted sometimes only when wrapped up in his shadows or left to bask in the brightest sunlight. No one dared say it to him, and the very idea of it was carefully kept from the youngsters of the Little Palace, but Madam Kirigan was dying. She could keep down broth most of the time, and some fruit, but little else. She hardly slept. One did not need to practice the small science of Grisha healing to understand that such a life was not sustainable. Tsar Vasily was overjoyed by her decline, naturally, and sent missives of sympathy to General Kirigan often—with invitations, innocent on their surface, to the Grand Palace where a bevy of noblewomen and the sisters and daughters of rich merchants were often in attendance. Aleksander understood what would come next—one day Alina would lay cold in his arms and the tsar would make him choose a new wife. He hadn’t felt such hot but frozen rage in nearly half a millennium and his inability to keep himself check was another reason he took to bringing his wife with him on his journeys.

They were in Kribirsk, well, the encampment of First and Second Army nearest the Fold, when a Fjerdan spy took a shot at him, and Alina—frail and beautiful in the weak sunlight to be had so near to the Fold—dove in front of the would-be assassin. Aleksander cried out when he heard the first shot go off, his eyes fixed on Alina’s face—*too soon, too soon, too*

*soon*—and then having to shield his eyes when an enormous burst of light erupted from her when the second shot from the repeating pistol hit her. **Sun summoner**, he thought when his eyes could focus again, *of course*.

His men closed in tightly around them, pulling him to his feet to while still others tackled the Fjerdan to the ground. Four healers nearly pounced on Alina, meanwhile to treat the gunshot wounds she'd sustained. She had not worn her corecloth greatcoat, and blood soaked her blouse shockingly fast. He would be in trouble, a cool and distant part of himself noted, for marrying a Grisha but he *had* just found the sun summoner. A sun summoner who was still bleeding too much.

Glaring a silent instruction to Ivan, he went to kneel at Alina's side, holding her hand tightly. Lending his power now that he knew he *could*. Making her summon would help her body respond better and faster under the healer's hands, and she would obviously not know how to do it yet herself. Her eyes fluttered open at his touch and she tried to smile, though her brow was furrowed with pain.

"Did you know? When—we—in Keramzin?" he murmured, unable to help or stop his curiosity, his wonder. He could still vividly recall the silence his call had been answered with, in that dimly lit room, the final word on whether his new wife was Grisha or not.

"No, I never—it would have appeared—"

"Not always, my dear, *my dearest*, not always," he said, his voice as gentle and kind as he could make it while overhearing the heated debate the healers were engaged in as they worked, trying not to alarm their general or their patient. The bad night a year before came back to him, watching her now as she grit her teeth and grunted in pain as two healers righted bone fragments and forced them to fuse together once more as another healer got the bleeding under control. Baghra so rarely used her power, she preferred to freeze and cough, and aside from his mother's hateful spite he'd never seen a Grisha bury their power so deeply or so well. Aleksander brought her hand to his lips, kissing her fingertips and murmuring endearments. In the rough circle of guards and soldiers the rest of the world had fallen away from them.

"Did—did you know? Sasha?" the healers were trying now to get her to sleep, carefully slowing her heart to calm her now that she was more stable, but Alina fought their influence as she fought everything. Grasping for answers as stubbornly as she clung to life each day.

"No, my dear, not until today. You burned brightly even without the sun in your veins. Rest, rest, I will stay right here," he stroked her cheek, keeping his voice as measured and even as possible, watching her eyes flutter shut, "that's my girl." Privately he was still running scared—hearing Alina's half-shout, the cracks of each shot as the gun went off, the yelling of the Grisha around them in the instant before her light flooded out. He had feared, in that instant of darkness, that he had again been widowed, as he had been so many times before, but this time with his wife dead on account of saving him rather than old age or other frailty.

For a long moment he was paralyzed with what to do next. He had the sun summoner—and his plans were in ashes around his ankles. If she'd been a lovely stranger he could have stayed the course. If she'd come to the Little Palace as a child, a little daughter for him to

raise, he could have stayed the course. But—he looked at Alina, her eyes shut under the slight influence of the hearttender that hovered at her side, and brushed a lock of her hair from her face. He was seized with a sudden desire to bundle her into their carriage—she was not usually strong enough to ride on her own—and urge them on to Os Alta at breakneck pace. But he is also loathe to put her in any kind of discomfort, wanting to wrap her up in their warm bedding and make her sip her usual tinctures to relieve her pains.

“Get me ten good riders, let them know to be ready for a journey to Os Alta. I’m—” he realized he was planning in the open and quickly signaled for everyone to move this meeting to his tent. Alina needed a good bed to rest in and he needed the privacy. Aleksander hated to let the healers put Alina on a stretcher, wanting to move her himself, but he realized that she needed real medical attention and not the worried fussing of her husband. On the backfoot now he forced himself to stand, leaving Alina’s hand resting over her heart, and fought for his composure. It took longer than he would have preferred to regain his equilibrium as he followed the group towards where he was quartered. The camp around him was a bizarre mix of loud chaos and silent awe—Alina’s light had probably been seen for a dozen miles in every direction, a double flash as the first and then the second bullet hit her. Aleksander bit his cheek to keep his face neutral, giving nothing to any spies who gazed at the reaction of the Black General to the discovery of the Sun Saint.

A cold possessive feeling stole over him as he ducked into his tent. Alina was his, he had been the one to choose her as his wife just as she had been the one to choose him as her husband, and she did not belong to these people as some savior. *No*, he realized, watching the healers gently move Alina from the stretcher to their bed, *she would not like you thinking this way. She belongs wherever she chooses, to whomever she chooses.* The jealous beast in his heart, greedy and without any knowledge of the meaning of **enough**, calmed at that thought. She had chosen him, continued to choose them, when she did not have to. He belonged to her.

“If we leave it will be under cover of night. We will send my carriage ahead as a decoy, make it look hasty and poorly organized but arm the escort to the teeth because where there is one Fjerdan there are always another handful lurking somewhere. Recruit first army to follow after the carriage if you have to,” he tersely instructed his oprichniki, unable to tear his eyes from where the healers continued to work on Alina now that she was in the semi-privacy of their tent. They’d removed her blouse and were gingerly washing the blood from her torso around her under garments. He glanced at his soldiers, pinning each with a hard look. “Tell them the danger, if they’re to go with you. It won’t make the tsar happy if we kill his wife’s countrymen, but *I* will be even less pleased if these Fjerdans try to take more Ravkan lives.” A chorus of assent greeted his ears and he dismissed them with a curt nod.

“Ivan, Vanya,” he murmured, going to the hearttender and the healer who were supervising those who gently coaxed Alina’s body to produce more blood from within to help her recover more quickly, “I won’t be far, but I need—” he composed himself, “if your unit needs me please send one of the oprichniki to find me. Please keep her comfortable.”

“Of course moi soverenyi,” Vanya replied with a short nod of the head. Ivan on the other hand said nothing, his focus devoted to Alina. Aleksander’s most trusted hearttender had been convinced for six straight years that Alina had somehow trapped his general into

marriage in order to spy on Grisha, but one day a few years ago Ivan had seen her kneel down to console a little durast child who had been rescued from a ship bound for Ketterdam. The child had been silent, nearly unresponsive even to the gentlest hearttender, but Alina had drawn the child to her and spoke of how she sometimes liked to pretend she was safe from the rest of the world behind a shuttered window and a happy mask—pantomiming pulling the window shut and taking the mask off, releasing a relieved breath as she did. Seeing her devoted attention to a traumatized child had somehow won Ivan over to her finally, and his loyalty was on full display now. Alina would be safe under his watch.

Aleksander prowled around the camp, watching a large company assemble to escort his carriage. There must have been twenty people, a hearty mix of First and Second Army, composed of a great number of riders in addition to a full complement of guards on the carriage itself. A decoy meant to attract a great deal of attention, instructed to go fast enough to look like they were spiriting something precious out of Kribirsk but slow enough to get caught doing it. He had interrogated the Fjerdan who had shot Alina, learning among other things that he had been attached to a large party of druskelle who had been creeping in the woods around Kribirsk for a month. Druskelle who had sworn to kill the Darkling of Ravka or die in the attempt. They had been about to move back north more towards Os Alta when word had come that the Darkling was coming to them—the carriage, where he was known to ride with his poor little wife, was their ultimate goal. Pin the carriage in the woods, trap the foul Darkling inside, and burn it with all souls inside. When they'd missed their chance when he arrived, taking a road that hadn't been easily blocked, this particular Fjerdan had taken what he thought might be their only opportunity. He had failed, but at least he had been brave enough to try.

"Darkling—we eventually will kill you," the spy had said, the strange grammar of Fjerdan fighting through as he spoke only lightly accented Ravkan, "we only have to find you with your magic cloak slipping from your back. You must hide from us every time, in your stolen night."

"My shortsighted friend," Aleksander replied in Fjerdan, hitting every hard stop of the language perfectly, "I have lived a very, very long time and you'll find that hiding under cover of night is the opposite of what I have done. If only anyone was smart enough to look close enough. Now," he had added, in Ravkan this time, squatting in front of the would-be assassin and looking him right in his pale ugly blue eyes, "are you quite sure you prefer firing squad? The Cut is a lot faster, a cleaner death." The mulish turn of the man's mouth told Aleksander everything he needed to know. Fjerdans were notoriously proud of how hard their language was to learn, and a foreigner speaking it like a native would win few friends among them.

"It is all the same to me, of course, but do remember me to your maker for having offered you the speedy way home."

A cheer went up, sometime later, when the shots of the firing squad rang out, though Aleksander didn't pay much heed to it. The camp was still on edge, unsure of what to do next—the otkazat'sya of the first army were always wary of the Grisha, even more so when he was present, but since he'd married 'one of them' in a way, they had tried to do things to get his attention and favor, if not approval. The speedy capture of his would-be assassin, his

deference to their wish to be the ones to execute said assassin—it was obvious they felt that they had made him proud in somehow. With a rueful grimace as he ducked into the officer's tent of the first army, he thought perhaps they had.

He ordered the first army to stop sending skiffs through the Fold for a short while—no sense risking more lives until they knew more. The officers had welcomed the pause, but they hesitated to ask about Alina. Had he known? Had he kept the sun saint for himself this whole time? Aleksander debated the answer he owed them, almost settling on silence before realizing that he could not lie about Alina in that way. Simply not giving voice to the truth was as good as a lie in her eyes.

"I know you are wondering," he said softly, looking at the map in the middle of the gloomy tent, not meeting anyone's eyes, "the answer is no, I knew when you did. Believe me or not, it is the truth. A...a summoner, any summoner, can sometimes unconsciously hide their gift so well that only the most extreme situation can reveal even a glimmer. You must understand, I would not subject any Ravkan much less my wife to such...barbary in the hopes of finding even an inferni, let alone the sun summoner."

"Will Madam Kirigan...is she..." so much hope had been pinned on the arrival of the Sun Saint, by Grisha and otkazat'sya alike. It explained the way the camp seemed to hold its breath around him. Trying to keep from celebrating only to have everything come crashing down with a solemn shake of a healer's head.

"I left her with my best, I must hope. We must all hope. Now, I know that there was some dependency on supplies coming from the west—let us see what resources can be pooled to stretch things a while longer, until we know...well, until we know." He hated to share the food and other supplies of the second army with the first but he knew that the soldiers of the first army had been waiting on supplies from West Ravka. Without the use of his squallers they could not *get* those supplies. The meeting dragged on from there, tedious but necessary.

Alina was responding well to the healers, Fedyor reported later on during a break. Fedyor's normally affable persona slipped from his face as he dared to say how close Alina had come to death. One bullet had broken a few ribs and collapsed one of her lungs, the second had chipped her shoulder blade and shattered part of her collarbone, and she had been equally at risk of bleeding out as from internal injuries. If she had been anyone but Aleksander's wife in the midst of the Grisha tents she *would* have died. Palace healers knew little of responding to these types of injuries, they both knew. Listening to the dispassionate words of his most trusted men—Ivan was with Alina, keeping watch for anyone who dared threaten her—Aleksander's eyes grew hot with tears he refused to shed. It never ended, the loss or risk of loss.

She had been his for almost eleven years. Alina had shared his bed, brought him tea on his late nights, had been his confidant on matters he could not bear to discuss with his Grisha commanders, had been a mother figure to nearly a generation of Grisha children, and many other things besides. He had grown so much more attached to her than he'd originally planned to. When he'd met and married her, chuckling together in the summer sunshine of Keramzin, she had been another tool to use. Their marriage appeased the tsar, a bit of smoke and mirrors for a handful of decades while he continued to wait for the Grisha testers to find

the sun summoner. He had planned on raising the sun summoner himself, ensuring they believed the same things he did, had the same vision and goals for not only Ravkan Grisha but all Grisha. When he would share his plans for the Fold with them, they would agree with him, they would see the necessity. It was what all parents did—educate their children, guide them, pass on the family profession.

Alina, though, Alina—he had made an effort with her almost unconsciously. It had been playing house at first, how could it have been anything else, but he grew to trust her. He loved her. Not just the kind of love that sprouted and flowered in an arranged marriage, but *loved* her. He would have obliterated Fjerda, he admitted to himself as he walked back to his tent to check on her, and he would have exulted in the terrible destruction of a second Fold if she had died. If her heart had stopped and her breath stilled, Aleksander knew that he would have given everything of himself to the merzost if it meant an apocalypse slammed down onto those frozen bastards in the north.

Pausing before he entered the tent he realized that he would not be able to hide his true identity from a sun summoner who had known him for a decade, who had seen his late nights and had soothed his worries when he dared speak them aloud. He would have to tell her, and hope that her affection for him held. Even if he managed to continue concealing his identity, his mother—who had never been polite or even respectful to Alina—would tell her. Baghra had not approved of him bending to the tsar by marrying an otkazat'sya, had goaded him constantly the last ten years. *What if you father children only to watch them die in fifty years? Trust me boy, it is more than a passing pang in your gut. What if your little pet dies giving you a weak child? What will all of this have been for, then?*

Aleksander shuddered at the things his mother would say now. Now that Alina was *special*, now that there was a sun summoner for the two of them to fight over. A sun summoner for her to try and take from him—since death was so much less likely to do so, now. It stood to reason that Alina could now hope for the kind of longevity and good health as he himself had been given. She was his opposite and his equal. Summoners did best in pairs, a natural kind of amplification that grew stronger as they passed the years together.

He grit his teeth, breathing in and out deliberately a few times to calm his mind. He would tell her. He would tell Alina himself of the Black Heretic and the Fold. The long wait for the sun summoner. How he loved her, too, how it pained him to know how short their time together was to have been. His unexpected and unbridled joy that he would not lose her so soon. His aimlessness at choosing to abandon centuries-old plans, because he could not face the prospect of seeing her lose her love for him, for his—*their*—people.

The tent was warm, as it always was when she was with him, and quite dark as everyone tried to let her continue resting. Alina was pale on the gray sheets, her skin drawn tight over her face, but she was mostly conscious as he gently lowered himself to sit on the bed next to her. She was disoriented somewhat, but *awake*. With a look he dismissed everyone inside, he wanted some time alone with her now.

“Sasha,” she murmured, reaching for his hand, smiling faintly when he gave it to her and drew it up to her mouth to press a kiss to his palm. Her lips were fevered.

“Alina, my dearest,” he said softly, “I am glad you’re alright. Have you been awake long?”

"Not long, Ivan made them ply me with stew. He insisted I eat a whole bowl, and what felt like an entire loaf of bread, and then an apple. If I am sick later, make sure it lands on his boots," she whispered, a hint of a pout in her voice. It had long been deemed impolite to comment on Alina's lack of appetite, even less so to *make* her eat. Very few of Aleksander's inner circle were trusted with making sure she didn't starve clean away, but usually Fedyor or Genya went to her because they had a way of cajoling her to overcome her nausea that few others did. Ivan was also usually quite effective, though his 'bedside manner' had always been a bit...lacking. Perhaps Aleksander should have left Fedyor here instead of Ivan, but he had wanted *the best* to look after her.

"How do you feel? Aside from trying to keep down your food," he asked, taking in that at some point she'd been helped into her woolen nightrail and the blood had been cleaned away, her hair washed and dried.

Alina ignored his question—

"Did you know? Have you—have you known the whole time?" her tone brooked no sidestepping, returning again to her fear that he had singled her out for her Grisha ability, that he didn't want *her* but the sunlight in her blood and bones. Aleksander knew the feeling well, and when he opened his eyes this morning he had wanted the sun summoner for just that. Now though, it was the furthest from his thoughts. "Sasha, tell me." He squeezed her hand, pulling their linked hands up to press them to his heart.

"Alya," he whispered, meeting and matching her tone in seriousness, "when I came to Keramzin I was under Vasily's command to marry an *otkazat'sya*. He was young then, yes, but not to be crossed. I sent for records of both your Grisha tests before I made my suit to you. You know, of all people, I cannot jeopardize Grisha. I refuse to." Then, reaching down to cup her face with his free hand, Aleksander called on her power. They were bathed in golden light in an instant.

"I called like this, on our wedding day, and nothing came. I married *you*, Alina, that day, not the sun summoner. I thought I would have you for four or five decades. I...I accepted that, I knew I would see you cold in your grave, that we would not grow old together. I didn't *want* that, but I accepted it."

"And now?" her eyes, as dark as his own, sparkled in the sunlight that surrounded them in the otherwise dark tent.

"Now I must tell you things I've kept from you. Grisha nonsense," he tried to inject a bit of teasing into his tone, using her own phrase of many years against her, "but also some things about me that no one knows, not even you my dear. Now, I get to keep you, hopefully, which has been a fond wish of mine for some time." Then, his heart in his throat, he spoke quietly, efficiently, stroking Alina's hair as he bared his soul.

When he finally finished speaking, Alina wept, her sobs wrenching and probably loud enough to be heard outside of the tent, but she kept his secrets. She didn't scream at what he told her, didn't bring Ivan and Fedyor in here to tear his heart in half—Fedyor might have hesitated, but Ivan wouldn't have blinked. Aleksander laid down at some point, tucking her in at his shoulder and stroking her hair. He had hoped for, but not expected, this. So many

lonely years and now—now he had someone like him, to support him and challenge him as he'd so rarely been in his life.

“Let’s bring down the Fold, tomorrow,” she murmured, her voice raw with grief but beneath it she was resolute. Aleksander froze, hesitating, but kissed her hair once, twice, and then pressed his cheek to her head. Of course she would decide that that was possible—she was the sun summoner, but she was also Madam Kirigan. Anything was possible, in her world.

“You just have to take it back. What you fed the—the merzost with. You said you only needed...me, if you want to *control* it, but I think you could also undo it, if I was there to keep you safe. Please, Sasha?”

“How do I keep—how do *we* keep them from harming Grisha? Ravka is only barely better than other places in the world, you know that, and—and trying to make a country of only Grisha isn’t possible. Grisha have otkazat’sya children more often than they pass on their powers. Whatever we did could be—”

“Aleksander,” Alina hugged him closer, reaching to lay her hand at his neck, thumb resting on his jaw, “we have time to figure that out. You haven’t figured it out in—in this long, I can’t solve all your problems just by existing, by being a sun summoner, but I will be here. I will help you.”

“Why the urgency?” he whispered, recalling her question from their wedding day. Strange how that day had been where his world had tilted on its axis, but he was only finding out now.

“Taking it down so soon after discovering the sun summoner means Vasily cannot decide how to hold it over your head that you accidentally married the sun summoner. Whatever anger he may have for you ‘hiding’ me cannot be shown publicly when your next decision was to reunite Ravka. He also can’t dither long enough for Fjerd and Shu Han to decide that they’re going to do about...me. Also, imagine the fallout with the peasantry for punishing the sun summoner and her husband for destroying the Fold. Even Vasily is not that stupid, though he might surprise us yet.”

Aleksander choked out a laugh, wriggling close enough to kiss her soundly, teasing her for her flippant treason when their lips parted.

“Well, how do we do this then?” he asked, eyes closed and playfully bumping his nose against hers between barely-there-kisses. He was afraid of her idea, deep down, but he would do as she asked. If it blew up in his face then he would avoid the wrath of an impotent tsar, at least.

After some arguing they settled on a solemn pre-dawn procession two days later, accompanied by any of the Grisha in the camp who wished to volunteer. She clung to his hand, their fingers laced together tightly, as they left his tent. Alina lit up the dark morning, leaving people gasping as she shone beneath a silver veil that a trio of fabrikators had worked on tirelessly since it had been requested of them. It covered her face and hair, trailing the ground with a train a dozen paces long, held from the ground by the work of a few skilled squallers. Behind them, around them, the Grisha walked in a column five bodies wide. It was

a spectacle meant to cement the image of all Grisha, not just the sun summoner, going together to tear down the Fold. The blessed Grisha, walking in the Sun Saint's light, a foundational image in the minds of all who later heard of the day the Fold came down.

Aleksander sang an old Ravkan hymn that was slowly picked up by the Grisha as they walked a mile to the Fold, the soldiers of the first army blinking in the light pouring out of Alina. Some fell to their knees as she walked by. Aleksander felt some fear as they stepped into the Fold, a place he had only been inside a few times since he made it. He had, for a time, thought that it was a matter of his skill as a summoner, his power, that had been the problem in taking it down or even using it against Ravka's enemies. Two hundred years ago he had realized he really did require a sun summoner to safely enter the Fold for any amount of time.

Now he stepped over the dead sands in Alina's light, safe.

They walked for an hour, Volcra screaming in rage as the sun burned them to nothing. The Grisha with them had been told to defend against any real intrusions into the safe globe of light he helped Alina maintain, but to otherwise save their strength. This was still dangerous. It had never been attempted before because there had never been a sun summoner before. It would not be wise to give in entirely to Alina's optimism, the boundless well of jovial spite and hope that drove her through her days.

When they stopped she addressed their companions.

"We are Grisha. We make things, we aren't fighters. We don't know what tearing down the Fold will do to the General and I, because we are not conquering it, we are removing it," Alina announced, speaking loud enough to reach everyone. Her voice was pitched in a mix of the familiar, the Madam Kirigan that they all knew, and the formality of the sun summoner come at last, "but we will face it together. Light cannot fully destroy darkness, just as darkness cannot fully engulf light."

She turned to him then, let him lift her veil as he did when they married, and held his face between her palms as he started to force the merzost into himself with gestures and words he swore he would never perform—*to take back, to unmake*. He had clung to the words *to make* and *to pour out*, but he'd never forgotten their opposites. It was horrific to have so much agony pouring back into him, with rage and sorrow following after in blazing, choking heat. Alina held his eyes though, never wavering, and she glowed brighter and brighter as he took his power back into his bones. Tears streamed down his face, and he felt like he couldn't get enough air, like his heart was going to rip in half, but he kept his eyes on hers as he gagged and choked on each breath. Alina had said that he must finish this, no matter what happened, and he had promised her he would.

His nature as an amplifier had long been shackled to the strength he had once bled out and into the Fold. Feeling his power rising in him was like his near-drowning as a youth in the worst and best ways. It felt like it would overpower him, but Alina took and took and took. Untrained as she was, she could use his power to expand her light as strongly and as far as he could power her. So while it felt like drowning, flailing and heavy and airless, it also felt like breathing in the cold air he'd gulped down after surviving his near-murder. Oh but it **burned**.

Alina, always ill or in pain, let out a whimper—strange how loud the Fold roared around them that he could even *hear* the sound—as her own power reached a fever pitch as well. Tears streamed down her cheeks as she kept her grip on him. He didn’t know how long they stood there, him absorbing four hundred years of feral merzost and shadows, her taking the overflow and letting it explode out of her as pure sunlight—but eventually he realized he was on his knees with her and that the howl of the fold was gone. His wife’s light only shimmered in and against the natural sunlight pouring down on them—was it midday?

His voice was shredded—he didn’t feel like he’d been screaming, he couldn’t honestly recall now—but he managed a faint *thank the saints* before collapsing into Alina’s arms. He was only dimly aware of her also falling to the ground, their limbs tangled together. He did not remember the Grisha bringing them back to the military encampment, only waking as he was laid out next to Alina on their bed.

Someone was leading prayers outside, pleading with the saints to keep safe the summoners of day and night, the destroyers of the Fold, to bless the Grisha who had walked with them. A hundred or more voices joined in the call and response, and he could hear weeping outside whenever there was a lull in the prayers. *Well, that’s a start I suppose*, he thought, weakly clutching Alina to his side. They would need to deal with the tsar soon, they would need to contend with bringing West Ravka to heel, they would have to dance a pretty jig with Shu Han and with Fjerda, and he’d come to accept that perhaps Grisha would *never* be truly safe because *no one* was truly safe.

There were so many more battles to face, and the war might seem unwinnable now but that didn’t mean he could choose the easy path because he was tired of climbing the difficult one. He cleared his throat, unsure if it was uncomfortable because of unshed tears or the rawness of inhaling that much merzost and shadow, and without meaning to he drifted off to sleep thinking that with Alina next to him he could bear it. They had promised each other that no matter what, they would present as united a front as they had for the last eleven years, so whatever ire the tsar had, whatever rumblings of civil war from the first army brass stationed in Novokribirsk...he wouldn’t be alone.

Besides, he decided as his eyes slipped shut, he might enjoy being called a summoner of night rather than shadow—the night provided respite and comfort the same as a gentle sunny day could.

# I'm with you, so I can't go on

## Chapter Summary

Ana Kuya could never give her orphan girls a lot, there were too many of them for that, but she can give Alina this: Do not let yourself wither over a man who regrets his own choices.

Or: Alina's perspective of being courted by and marrying the Darkling of Ravka

## Chapter Notes

Don't worry, Ana Kuya is just being a pessimist. As the Youth say: Aleksander immediately becomes the worlds biggest simp.

This chapter gets a smidge racy but nothing smutty exactly. And yes, you caught me, I watched some of the Punisher because of reasons.

This chapter honestly wouldn't have happened save for the massive outpouring of love that I got in the comments and people bookmarking it. I'm so thankful for all of you, I hope this lives up to the first chapter in your minds!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

There were no negotiations between families for them once she accepted General Kirigan's—*Aleksander*'s—offer. He had no family, she was of age, and also without a family. The Duke did puff up with pride when she went to inform him of the development. He counted this as another successful tie to the movers and shakers of Os Alta, but he had also ultimately wanted Alina to have a stable future. It was the reason why he funded an orphanage, after all: to give orphans like her a place in the world.

Once she'd been released from her agreement with the Duke she had gone to Ana Kuya, walking across the grounds to the building that served as the orphanage itself. She was accompanied to the door by two of the General's oprichniki and she fought against a blush as she closed the thin door of Ana Kuya's sitting room. They would hear her questions whether or not they were in the room with her, but she felt better about asking without them hovering over her shoulders. Alina spent half the afternoon with the orphanage marm, learning what she could about married life. The church had its own ideas about how married couples ought to live—partners in life, chosen to support one another throughout trials and the great duty they all owed to Ravka. But there was little about *life* that could be gleaned from sermons—the constant small struggles of getting along in bed on a hot night, the early shy

embarrassment of tending to bleeding cloths or cleaning up after lying together. The quick joy of laughing together over an old argument. Ana Kuya had lost her husband to the Fold, but that did not mean she had lost all of her knowledge of these things.

“He seems besotted enough,” she said, as their afternoon was winding down into golden red twilight, “it should not be difficult to get him to be sweet to you, when you know each other well enough for a proper tumble. Savor that, Alina, never take it for granted. There’s many a marriage like this that’s cold and...painful.”

“And—and if—” Alina could hardly bring herself to put her worries into words. What kind of mistake had she made today? Could she still get out of it?

“Then get something to love and care for. Look after children—Saints, get *him* to give you one of your own. Plant a garden or raise hunting dogs. Do not let yourself wither over a man who regrets his own choices.”

*Don’t be sorry for what you are, Alina, the world will never accept the apology.*

“Thank you,” Alina finally settled on saying, the only thing she *could* say, and got up to go back to the manor to get trussed up in more hand-me-down finery by the Duchess’ maids.

At the dinner she was seated next to the General, near the head of the table rather than the end with Ana Kuya and some guests from the nearby village. She blushed under the attention everyone gave them when the Duke announced that his ward, Miss Starkov, would soon marry General Kirigan of the Second Army. The congratulations were not exactly heartfelt from anyone, but most of those present gave her polite smiles as they spoke. She hardly tasted the food, though her intended made sure that she had a full plate. He did not monopolize her attention, though he certainly made himself present in her conversation at the table, to the point where she wondered if this was how their lives would be together in Os Alta.

As dessert was served—summer strawberries, clotted cream, and an array of lemon and orange tarts—he took her hand and twined their fingers together.

“I thought tomorrow I might take Miss Starkov on an outing, if she can be spared for the day,” he said as the plates were settled in front of each of the diners. The Duke looked positively delighted to acquiesce and offered the use of his carriage immediately, an offer that was graciously accepted just as quickly. She noted that General Kirigan looked quite beautiful with a smile on his face. After the meal concluded the General—*Aleksander—*escorted her to the stairs that led to the wing her room was in and pressed a kiss to her hand. *Besotted*, the word from Ana Kuya’s lips slammed into Alina’s heart. He was under no compulsion to put on a performance now—his oprichniki had tactfully stayed back at the last set of doors, so they had something approximating privacy. She took a step closer to him, tucking her arms to her chest as she leaned against him, smiling to herself when his own arms came up around her, holding her close with one hand splayed wide over her shoulder and the other at the saddle of her hip.

He breathed her name like a prayer, the way some people—herself included—might say *Saints*, half wonder, half wish.

"You'll see me tomorrow, Aleksander," she said into the close air between her face and his kefta, "I won't disappear, I promise."

"I believe you," he whispered, breath warm on her ear, almost a kiss. And then he let her go, taking a half-step back and taking her hands in his, kissing each of them. Alina made herself turn to the stairs when he let her hands go, feeling his eyes on her until she went around the corner of the landing and disappeared from his eyeline.

The next morning they went to the village proper of Keramzin where Alina learned a few things. One, as soon as people had learned of her intended husband their overall treatment of her changed to how they treated Grisha—not much of a step *up* so much as *sideways*. Two, Aleksander had expensive taste—nearly everything they commissioned, from the dressmaker to the cobbler, was finer than half of what the Duchess herself owned. Three, Aleksander *listened* to her. He had not made a peep or even quirked his eyebrow at her when the dressmaker asked what Alina wished to have completed first out of all the other items they had commissioned, and Alina had chosen the riding cape above everything else. He only looked to Alina for confirmation when he asked that golden embroidery be added to the cape, the only comment he had made as she was measured for dresses, trousers, tunics, and underthings.

Alina had bitten her tongue to keep from justifying herself to him—he had not asked, she was not required to tell him. She had a solid explanation—she knew they would travel to Os Alta by the way he had originally come. There was no carriage to pile trunks on, and as far as she knew the General had not sent for one.

"And is there enough lace for a veil?" she quietly asked as Mila, the dressmaker, wound up her measuring tape and tucked it into her pocket. Alina felt shy, unable to ignore the feeling that she was being demanding and above her station. Imagine an orphan from Keramzin getting married with a fine lace veil of all things.

"Of course, Ali—Miss Starkov," Mila said, quickly stepping around Alina to open one of the drawers along the wall and gently pulling back some tissue paper. The lace she withdrew was white with a few sparks of gold among barely-there light blue flowers embroidered into it. The effect gave the impression of a cloudy summer day and Alina fell in love with it immediately. She had never been brave enough to ask to look at the lace before when she'd purchased cloth for use around the Duke's manor. Alina glanced over her shoulder at the General. He shrugged with an easy smile.

"And a veil, like the one Madam Zakharov wore at her wedding."

"Are you sure?" Despite his agreement in the shop, the General—*Aleksander*—seemed more than a little puzzled until, back in the Duke's carriage she explained herself. There was something half disbelieving on his face as he listened, to the point where Alina felt herself blushing under the intense look he leveled at her.

"A riding cape over a dress will make the dress look a bit newer, and then I will have a warm wool cloak to wear on the journey to Os Alta. I don't—I don't want people to see me arrive with a caravan of trunks filled with the finest clothes I could lay hand to in Keramzin. I prefer to have my things follow after in a humble cart or to buy my things in Os Alta."

“So—perception,” he sounded impressed, he *looked* impressed, and Alina smiled as she nodded in agreement. She settled back in her seat to watch the farmland roll by as the driver turned them towards the manor house.

“So thoughtful,” he murmured, almost too softly for her to hear but she felt his dark eyes on her nonetheless. She couldn’t help it—she looked at him and met his gaze, blushing at the steady way he stared at her. “Well, since you have gone to the trouble of thinking ahead for me, I will need to teach you to ride in return.”

It was an idea he clung to for only a few days, hoping to make her a decent enough rider for the trip to Os Alta. Alina’s body, ever vigilant for ways to fail her, had other ideas. She tried, she never complained and tried not to let her discomfort, pain, and fright show, but somehow both the horse and Aleksander himself could tell. He never let things get so far as allowing his horse to throw her, but after four days he gave up the notion for the time being. A wry twist crossed his face—he was not angry with her, just trying to change his plans mid-stream and it showed.

“You’ll have to ride with me then, my dear,” he said, easily hefting himself up into the saddle before reaching down to help her up to sit in front of him. Her legs protested, her belly aching from muscles that had never been asked to work this hard, but Alina still settled herself as he wished her to.

“This should be a little easier to manage for everyone involved,” he said into her ear as he urged the horse into a quick canter. As was his habit if they were close together, when he could get away with it, his free hand splayed on her hip. It helped keep her steady and made her feel less like she was going to immediately fall. They made a few circuits of the fields around the manor and Alina eventually relaxed enough that she felt she could rest back against him.

“Do you want adjoining rooms, at the Little Palace? West facing windows?” she shivered at his voice in her ear, turning slightly to look back at him.

“I thought we would—that is—”

“You prefer the Grand Palace?”

“No! Stop—stop putting words in my mouth. I thought—I thought we would share a room. Is—is that not allowed?” she only knew a little of how nobility lived and nearly nothing of how Grisha lived in their palace. Did they keep separate rooms as a rule? Was she expected to do that as well?

“I—” He couldn’t seem to find a reply for a long moment, “we both know I am taking the greater advantage here. I don’t want to make you feel that you must keep up appearances when we are in Os Alta.”

Alina was hurt for a moment, thinking he was pushing her away, but she decided that this marriage would be what she made it. Aleksander would indeed reap a greater reward in the scheme of things than she did—the Tsar could not punish him for marrying an *otkazat’sya*, even if the *otkazat’sya* was one such as herself, because that was what he’d been commanded

to do. He would soon be free to do as he willed, while she was going to a far away place to live among strangers. That was all true. But she could make other things true, too.

“I understand the need to keep up appearances, but that doesn’t mean I don’t...that I don’t *want* you,” she said, painfully conscious of his thighs caging her own, her back pressed to his chest, and then huffed, “if you were one of the townsmen we wouldn’t be having this conversation.” Alina took another moment, made longer by his silence and the clatter of horse shoes on the gravel lane.

“You asked me to walk with you, for the time I have. I said I would. So *let me*. I don’t want separate rooms, I don’t want to live in the Grand Palace. I want to keep a garden, and for you to keep trying to teach me to ride. Whatever it is, whatever comes, don’t shut me out because of some misplaced guilt at dragging me into your Grisha nonsense. I didn’t—I didn’t have to accept you.”

Aleksander didn’t say anything to that, but as he turned the horse back towards the manor he wrapped a possessive arm around her waist while he breathed a whisper of a kiss to her temple. Alina settled further into his embrace, doing her best to ignore how uncomfortable she found horse-riding, and allowed herself to feel safe with him. He was a shadow summoner, he was more than eighty years old if he was a *day*, and he let her argue with and scold him like she was an innkeep’s wife.

When they made it back to the Duke’s stables he dismounted first and then helped her down, steadying her until she had her feet under herself again. There was something tender in his eyes as he looked down at her, gently tucking a lock of hair behind her ear and then pressing his palm to her cheek.

“I wish I could whisk you away,” he whispered, hardly seeming to realize he was speaking at all as he stroked his thumb along her cheekbone. Alina blushed under his intense gaze, but she didn’t pull away from him.

“The church clerk said he can have us married as soon as he gets permission from the—the  
—”

“The Apparat, a horrid creature,” he said instantly when she paused, still stroking her skin but otherwise not moving a muscle.

“From the Apparat, who has to check that *you*,” she poked his chest, “are not already married. Until then no—no *whisking*.” He laughed, his nose crinkling adorably as he did, and then he sighed, bringing his other hand to cup her neck—his thumb chucked her chin up a little to meet his eyes more directly.

“Very well, my dear,” he said, a grin tracing his face as she preened under his words and his touch. Quick as lightning she took a chance and leaned up to kiss him. It started out sweet but quickly grew intense, his fingers buried in her hair while her hands grasped him closer, nails scrabbling against the embroidery of his kefta. They might have forgotten themselves if not for the stables being in easy view of the manor house and its occupants. “Always a surprise with you,” he said, pecking her lips one last time before stepping slightly away from her, his hand falling to the base of her spine as he escorted her back to the house.

As though summoned by their conversation, the written confirmation from the Apparatus arrived the next week. The clerk at the chapel of Sankt Michail of the Fields sent a runner to the manor when he received the news. Aleksander had promised, weeks before, that he was not now a married man. He had gripped the rib of Sankt Michail as he'd spoken. At the time Alina had thought it charming that he chose such an old way of oathtaking, old but no less pious than swearing on a holy book. The people of Keramzin had admired him for it, too, for it was said that Sankt Michail had been a hearttender who saved the town. In life he had negotiated and mediated arguments among his neighbors until a band of Fjerdans had made him tell them if they were lying or not. They had said they would kill all in Keramzin if he did not allow them to take his head. He could have lied, none in the town save a jealous apothecary had given him up as their hearttender. He hadn't. At least, that was the story. Keramzin had kept his body, naming him a saint for saving the town. The Fjerdans had kept his head.

Alina wondered now, looking at him across the breakfast table, how Grisha felt about legends such as Sankt Michail. There were other things on Aleksander's mind, though, by the jaunty way he spread butter across his toast. She smiled, promising herself that she would ask him someday, and turned her attention to the Duchess who suddenly had opinions about the flowers they ought to use for the wedding. Alina ended up agreeing to whatever the woman wanted, the flowers would come from the Duchess' gardens it was only fair she decide what was used.

Two days later, in the little chapel, Alina grit her teeth and tried not to appear nervous as Ana Kuya—the nearest thing she had to a parent—walked up the aisle with her. At the alter waited the clerk with his books, and Aleksander to his left. The pews were filled with most of the orphans, a few villagers, and the Duke with his household on one side. The other side was thinly populated by the Grisha who had come with their General on his journey to Keramzin. They were dressed in their bright, finely embroidered keftas, their faces glowing and healthy in that way that only Grisha ever did. They almost shone in the light.

Everyone was respectfully still while the clerk droned on about the importance of looking to the saints while in the state of matrimony, the importance of faith, the stability provided to those who wed for good reasons. It was painfully dull—the itinerant priest was not due back to Keramzin for a number of months, and Aleksander had been given a tight deadline by Tsar Vasily, so they suffered through all the platitudes the clerk could think of as well-wishing and warning to his charges. Alina wondered for a moment if she would wake up from this strange dream. How had this happened? Why had Aleksander come *here*, become fixed on *her*, what had possessed her to accept him? She kept her rising panic in check though and thanked Sankt Michail for being a saint of truth. She would be alright, the truth—whatever it was—would come out eventually.

Aleksander lifted her veil, his fingers delicate on the lace as he folded it a few times so it sat on her head with just the scalloped edge over her forehead. A modest look that framed the face nicely and was still worn by women in the country to claim their status in the community. Did seeing her like this let him reclaim some of that life he had tried to cling to, before he'd been found out as Grisha? His eyes glittered with pleasure as he looked down at her face, so no matter the answer she was happy to see his pleased expression.

The ring he gave her was a simple but odd band. It was made by one of the durasts of the little palace, sent for the day Alina had accepted Aleksander's offer. It was squared off on the outside but round inside. A finger—*my finger*, she thought as he slipped it on her hand—fit in it easily while not sitting obtrusively against her other fingers. Looking away from their hands into her—*Saints, he's my husband*—into her husband's face she easily saw his delight at the fit of the ring, and she gathered herself to put a smile on her face. Her hand still ended up shaking a little as she gave her vow and slipped a ring on his finger in return. He was gentle, then, taking her hand and kissing the skin just above where her ring sat. Alina again wondered what dream she'd gotten caught up in. There were stories of the Darkling, the skirmishes he could put an end to with his magic. He was a lifelong soldier, but with her now in the musty and dim chapel of Sankt Michail he was just a man with a tender quirk to his brow as he looked down at his wife.

The rest of the day passed in a blur, only coming into sharp focus during their conversation in his room—but Alina had not been able to stay up very late, falling asleep quickly from the warmth of his body next to hers in the bed.

Alina woke up feeling not exactly rested but with a kind of comfort that she'd maybe never had. It wasn't yet dawn, the light coming through the window ethereal and blue. Aleksander slept still, his arm curled around her and their legs tangled together. Her nightrail had ridden up somewhat, and his own shirt had a few buttons loose that hadn't been when they'd gone to bed. The Darkling, she thought, amused for a moment at the title. It was half fearsome, half ridiculous—it was almost a name one gave a particularly ridiculous soldier, but at the same time he had carved and clawed his way to the position he held. There was very little *-ling* about a man who did that. She still didn't understand why he'd settled on her, he could have married any woman.

She had liked that he had been so forthright about everything since he'd proposed. She wouldn't agonize over his reasons for doing so, she promised herself as she stroked his bearded cheek in the half-light of dawn. He was still a stranger, but he was a considerate man, he bothered to ask her questions about herself. Her friends—aside from Mal—had been few and far between, and something about Aleksander's dark eyes made her feel special as they'd spoken before she'd dropped off to sleep. He always made her feel special, cherished somehow.

*Lilies, she reminded herself as she fought back a yawn, I must make sure to plant lilies. Surely they'll let me.*

"Good morning, my dear," her new husband said, his voice rough with sleep as he turned his face into her hand to kiss the heel of her palm before he pulled her close to him. Alina blushed, looking away, suddenly feeling everywhere their bodies touched despite their night clothes.

"Good morning, did you sleep well?"

"Surprisingly so," he mumbled, stretching a bit and turning onto his side, "I think I will keep you." Alina laughed and chuckled his chin up like he was fond of doing to her, deciding to tease him.

"You'll have to, you made the church clerk use his best paper for a copy of our marriage record. He would never forgive you if you changed your mind so soon. Besides that, I'm sure the maids have already boxed up all of my belongings in hopes that you'll take me away today."

"I would hate to *inconvenience* them after how accommodating they've been," they hadn't been, they both knew. Between his Grisha and her Shu heritage the household staff sometimes couldn't decide which to snub more explicitly lately.

"They won't quite get their way, though, I'm afraid," he continued, "Vanya isn't due to return from his testing rounds until tomorrow, so they'll have to suffer feeding all of us for another day or so, curtsying to Madam Kirigan as they pass her in the halls."

"Aleksander, I don't want to face them yet. I want to stay here," she said, heart thundering when he cupped the side of her face. Saints his hands—were his hands this big yesterday? She felt dwarfed by him now, different from whenever she'd stood next to or embraced him over the last few days. His eyes, dark as night in the relative dimness of their room, stayed fixed on hers. His hair was sticking up in places, and the longer portions of his beard were also awry. She absently tried to stroke the errant hairs back into place and earned a pleased hum from him before he spoke.

"If there is anything I've learned summoning shadows, it is that the light always finds you whether you're ready or not. Now, a kiss for luck and up with you."

He obviously meant for it to be a quick peck, but when Alina kissed him back it grew into something more almost immediately. Like a match to paper they descended into a kind of heated madness in the span of a breath. Aleksander whispered her name between nips and angling this way and that to meet her lips, inhaling deeply at the same times that she did, it felt like he was sucking the breath right out of her. When he rolled to lean over her. Alina maneuvered her legs to make room for him, cradling his hips and shivering when he let his weight down until they were flush together, only their nightclothes between them. Her nightrail rode up some, and his hand snaked down to stroke her hip under the bunched fabric.

"Aleksander, wait—" only her grip on his hair with one hand and his night shirt with the other kept him from springing away entirely. As it was, her words were like snow down the back of his neck and he breathed deeply with his forehead bent to her shoulder. She let him calm down a bit, gently scratching her nails against his scalp and trying to catch her breath as well. She could feel his heart racing, and she *ached* where their hips rested together, motionless from his weight on her.

"I'm—Alina, I'm sorry—" she shook her head and took a deep breath when he quieted, and she turned just enough to kiss his hair once—twice, inhaling the scent of it as she did.

"I just don't want Keramzin to have this memory of mine. I want it to be somewhere new," she forced herself to say, feeling her skin burn with embarrassment, "I like this, I want this—but for this morning, kissing, being close...that's all I want today. If that's alright?" she asked as he lifted his head up to look at her, his elbow propping him up on the bed enough to truly see her face. Seeing the look in his eyes though she panicked, "If you insist though, I—"

"My dear, only tell me and I will listen. I chose you because I wanted you. Always remember that. It isn't just for your pretty face that I want you, it means I want to hear the thoughts in your pretty little head, I want to hear you speak, to listen to you. Let me do that?" Alina consciously relaxed under him, changing their embrace from something desperate to something more like a hug, and the *sigh* that escaped Aleksander made her smile. He settled onto her, heavy but comforting in a way, and lightly traced the angles of her face.

"I still want to skip breakfast," she mumbled, her eyes closing as his thumb smoothed along her eyebrow.

"You must eat, Alina, even just an apple. For me?" Alina dragged her eyes open again, putting on her best 'grouchy orphan' expression as she peered up at him. It shocked a smile and a laugh out of him, but he was otherwise unmoved. She stuck her tongue out at him and mumbled:

"For you, then, an apple."

Alina let him convince her to eat more than a single apple, and after breakfast he helped her gather up her gear for herb harvesting from her garden. They spent much of the morning together that way, sitting in the sunshine. Aleksander proved an attentive assistant, with a curious familiarity with a few of the plants she was harvesting. As they worked, him holding her baskets and containers as she trimmed, uprooted, and plucked, he told her more of the Little Palace. She had been hearing about it in pieces since the Grisha had arrived, more once she'd accepted his marriage proposal, but she valued his unvarnished words now that they were alone. It was his home, and had been for decades while he balanced a complex relationship with the tsars of the Grand Palace. The last tsar, Pyotr, had been somewhat easy to manage, while her husband had not quite gotten a bead on how to get what he wanted out of the new tsar, Pyotr's son Vasily.

"He will be in such a grand snit over you, I think, that he will avoid speaking to me for at least a few weeks," Aleksander said, his dark eyes fixed on Alina's hands as she cut yarrow stalks and laid them out carefully. The plants could be used as a decent astringent, but only if they weren't crushed prematurely during harvesting. Alina trusted Aleksander not to play with the stalks only because he hadn't toyed with the sprigs of rosemary she had started out with.

"With all you've told me I don't think I ever want to speak to him," Alina replied, pausing and meeting his eyes, "he sounds like a petulant boy, not a tsar." As soon as the words were out of her mouth she regretted them—

"My dear," his voice was soft and serious, but without a trace of anger, "you must learn to speak that way only when we are alone like this. In the open, where there is no one nearby to overhear. The Little Palace is as safe as I can make it, but sometimes the walls have ears."

It was not the speech she thought he would make to caution her, but it did tell her more than she had thought to learn her first full day married. She bit her lips and blinked away her discomfort. Aleksander was not a man from Kribirsk or Carveya, not a merchant or a farmer or a factory owner from West Ravka. He was the shadow summoner, General of the Second

Army. If he told her things then she could not share her thoughts on those things with a single living person.

“Alina,” his voice helped her focus back to the immediate present, meeting his eyes again, “I did not say you had the wrong of it. I would like you to speak to me openly like that. If I had wanted a woman who didn’t think—or worse, didn’t trust me—I wouldn’t have left Os Alta. Only, be careful when you agree to heartily with the Darkling.” His attempt at humor fell flat with Alina, her brief discomfort redirected into something she could do something about.

“Don’t call yourself that. Not with me,” she countered with, her vehemence obviously taking him by surprise and he flashed a weary smile towards her. He reached up and gripped her arm for a moment, respectful and affectionate.

“A joke, my dear, but you must accustom yourself to hearing others call me that.” His hand dropped away and his mouth twisted in a self-deprecating kind of way, “especially Baghra, who will not like you because she does not like me.”

“Baghra, not my friend, got it,” Alina giggled, a flash of nerves quickly buried as she turned her attention to her herbs again. Aleksander stood up next to her, stretching and popping the bones of his spine back into place with an exaggerated groan.

“The olive branch is worth a try of course, but she isn’t...a gardener if you take my meaning.” She’d known him for less than a season, only spent time with him for the last few weeks since his proposal and all of the arrangements that were required to be made, but Alina grinned and reached for his hand to get help standing back upright.

“A gardener, huh?” the tease in her voice wasn’t lost on him, and he leaned in to press his forehead to hers, sharing a breath with her as his eyes slipped half closed.

“Correct. I don’t think she’s ever been much of one. Not like my pretty wife is,” he chased his words with a kiss pecked to the corner of her mouth, his crisp way of speaking making her smile as he turned his attention to gathering up the baskets and jars that she’d filled so far. All that was left then was to take his arm and walk with him back to the stillroom to finish processing the day’s harvest. The herbs were a last gift to the Duke, who had not yet decided how he was to replace her and how many people it might take to do that. Now he would have at least a few weeks’ worth of supplies for Ana Kuya’s horrible poultices.

They left three days later—Vanya had been late returning, having traveled slower with a little boy named Oleg in tow. Oleg was a heartrender whose parents could not get rid of him fast enough when his powers were revealed. The child rode with Aleksander’s right hand man, another heartrender named Ivan, for it was safer to have Grisha with ‘like’ abilities nearby untrained Grisha. At least, that was what Aleksander told her when she asked him why they’d put a traumatized little child in the arms of the stoic Ivan of all people—especially when the child at least knew Vanya the healer. *Like calls to like*, Aleksander said softly, something far away in his eyes as he spoke. Alina hadn’t pressed him, not wanting to know what he was thinking in that moment.

They traveled slower than they otherwise might have—Alina was still no horsegirl, and Oleg needed frequent rest breaks according to Ivan—but after eight days on the road they

reached Os Alta. Saddle-sore, dusty from the road, grimy from only having ready access to sponge baths in the inns they'd stayed in, tired from long days under the hot sun—but they made it. Alina only dimly remembered the towns of West Ravka and nothing had compared to those memories until now. The city itself stretched and sprawled, but off in the distance she could see two separate sets of onion domes—the Grand Palace, and the Little Palace.

“Do we go around, General?” one of the squallers asked. Her name was Zoya and she had been exceptionally prickly towards Alina up until the wedding—after which, the fight seemed to go out of her and she had retreated into a kind of cool neutrality with how she spoke to or about Alina. Right now she was looking down at Os Alta with a thinly veiled contempt.

“It will be another two hours added to the day,” a tidemaker named Vikas said, doing a better job than Zoya at hiding his feelings. Behind Alina on the horse Aleksander said nothing, his hands loose on the reins. She couldn’t see his face—did it show the same derision for the grand city? Did he send censure-filled glances towards his Grisha? Beneath them, his horse barely even moved a muscle, calm because its master was calm. Alina didn’t relish the idea of spending two additional hours—beyond what she already had to—on a horse, but neither did she relish the idea of so many people gawking up at her. Was that what caused the disdain so evident in Zoya and Vikas—they’d been stared at enough for the last week and didn’t wish to experience it a moment longer? She couldn’t be sure. She also couldn’t be sure she didn’t feel the same.

“We go around, Oleg should not be among crowds right now,” Ivan said, his voice assured and confident of being listened to. Aleksander shifted, his body canting and his heels digging slightly into the horse’s flanks as he moved to obey his hearttender’s directive. Alina took a deep breath, trying to push away her weariness, and tucked her head under her husband’s chin. What were another several hours after the week she’d had? Without meaning to she dozed off, lulled away by the dull ache of her body numbing her mind and the warmth of the sun on her and the now-familiar scent of Aleksander’s skin—only awaking to the shouts of the oprichniki greeting them at the gates of the Little Palace, her sudden start causing Aleksander to press his hand across her lower ribs firmly to keep her from startling the horse in kind.

There was not much in the way of a formal greeting, they had sent no riders ahead. Alina was perversely glad, since now that a *palace* with actual fireplaces and bathing chambers and beds that had soft sheets awaited her she could hardly find it in herself to be social. She felt like an urchin, like one of the children sometimes taken in by the orphanage who wore what clothes they’d stolen from obliging laundry lines and skinny from eating only the gleanings of the fields. Maybe it was prideful, but this was not how she wanted the Grisha to meet Madam Kirigan.

The Little Palace was nothing like she had quite imagined, and walking into it on her husband’s arm was certainly not a figure in her wildest, silliest day dreams. Whispers of servants followed them as they walked through a maze of corridors and up a few flights of stairs before Aleksander shut a door behind them with a kind of finality that snapped her out of the fugue she’d descended into. She turned and grinned when he let out a sigh at being

home, his whole demeanor changing from *General Kirigan* to a man exhausted from a week on the road, weariness turning his expression hangdog, his shoulders drooping.

“I,” he let his head *thunk* back on the door, his eyes nearly drifting shut as he drew out the word, “am going to summon for a hot bath and then something for supper.” He stayed put though and let his eyes finish drifting shut. Alina thought he almost looked young, a certain smoothing of his brow belying his age. She stepped back to him, sliding her arms around his torso and laying her head on his chest. She herself felt like she’d been run over by a wagon repeatedly, but he was so warm she could almost forget it. Aleksander pressed a barely-there kiss to her hairline, asking in a whisper if she’d like to join him.

“For your bath?” she giggled, happy at the chuckle he half-heartedly gave at her tone.

“For everything, but first, yes, a bath I think,” he said, opening his dark eyes again. *Saints, he is beautiful like this*, Alina thought, her heart lurching.

Biting her lips to conceal a smile and more giggles, she nodded and hugged him more tightly. Aleksander’s answering smile was like a fall sunrise—slow, then all at once. He roused himself to stand up straight again, kissing her cheek and maneuvering to open the door again to give his orders. It was a little like feeling the sun go behind a cloud, watching him assume *General Kirigan* again, like they were two separate people in the same body. She peeked around his arm and looked at the two oprichniki who bowed to her husband before one of them took decisive steps to find a servant.

“Now, let me give you the tour,” he announced once they were alone in the room again, the door shut for the time being, and Alina leaned against his side as he walked them through the suite. It was not as big as she’d thought it might be given that this was a *palace*, though it was admittedly far too large for a single man. There was a small bathing room and privy, three rooms—one he had set up as a bedroom, the others serving as a private study and a glorified storeroom—and a larger parlor that had a door to the main hall and another set of doors that opened to a more formal meeting room taken up by bookshelves, a large table strewn with maps and other reports, and a desk that was nearly spotless save for a beautiful set of pens and a crystal inkwell. *The war room, unfortunately too often in use*, Aleksander said, closing the doors to it and locking them right as the servants knocked—a dozen of them bearing large pails of hot water in each hand, another several carefully bearing a full tea set and platters of food from the kitchens.

“I should have thought...nothing to be done for it now, but I should have been more specific,” Aleksander muttered, looking between the bath and the food, looking if possible even more weary, and Alina couldn’t help it any longer and laughed. He was being ridiculous.

“Aleksander, the food will keep, the hot water will not,” she said, nearly skipping into the bathing room and shedding clothing as she went. A week and a day spent nearly attached to her husband at the hip, unable to *do* anything about that either, had stripped her of much of her nervousness around him. It was not all gone, might never be, but she could tease him this way. He followed her, a warm look to his eyes as he also unbuttoned his clothing and trailed it behind him. Alina huddled in the tub to make room for him but he first went around her to

a small vanity, coming back with a cruet of liquid lavender soap, a wash brush, and a few wash cloths that he set on a low stool next to the claw foot tub before climbing in behind her.

“See? You think of everything,” she chirped, stubbornly shoving her nerves down as she leaned back in his arms.

“If you say so, my dear,” he said, hesitating before kissing her bare shoulder, uncaring of the grime of days on the road in nearly the same clothes. She let him wash her hair, pouring little dollops of soap on the crown of her head and working the liquid into fluffy suds with quick fingers, and then holding her chin, *just so*, so that as he rinsed the soap out none dribbled into her eyes. He worked efficiently, not lingering overmuch or making her feel embarrassed, and it was over all too soon for her taste. Alina found she quite liked feeling—she wasn’t sure *cherished* was the right word, but she had an unshakable feeling that almost no one was allowed to know this version of Sergei Aleksander Kirigan, that this was special.

His surprise was palpable when she curled and turned in the tub, beckoning him to do the same. She was not nearly as elegant as he had been with the little cruet of soap, nor as deft with keeping the suds from running down his forehead when she rinsed his hair, but she didn’t pour out too much soap and she didn’t get any of the suds in his eyes which she considered successful enough.

“What a sweet thing you are,” he whispered later, after wrapping her in a long linen towel, sweeping her hair up in a smaller length of cloth twisted around her head. Their skin was pink from the heat of the bath, the scrubbing of the wash brush, and perhaps even a little blushing on both their parts. Alina carded her fingers through his hair once, twice, tucking the damp locks back into something approximating how he liked to style it.

“Only because you’re nice to me,” Alina said, taking his hand as she stepped away towards the parlor where their supper was laid out. The hot food had cooled but that didn’t diminish that it was not the hard bread and dried fruit of the road or the dubious stews of roadside inns and public houses. Her comment had him smiling as they sat down together. The bath had helped loosen muscles stiff from days and days of riding, and had done a lot of good for refreshing Alina’s spirits. After managing to eat a full plate of food—good, simple food like what was eaten in the country, not unlike what people generally ate in Keramzin—she felt the exhaustion creeping back up on her. Glancing at Aleksander she saw the corners of his eyes pinched with the same exhaustion, and the glances he tried to hide towards his war room and his bedroom in equal measure.

Alina made the decision for him, dropping an impish kiss on the top of his head as she went to the bedroom. He caught up with her in a few steps, the dishes from their meal left uncovered, the chairs at the table left akimbo, their clothes still on the floor where they’d discarded them for the bath. No one had prepared clothing for General Kirigan’s wife and she certainly did not want to re-use the nightrail she’d been sleeping in for a week, so she settled for one of his night shirts—biting her lips as he slipped it over her head, her towels in a heap on the floor around her ankles—and curled close to him as the sun slipped below the horizon and the temperature quickly fell. Os Alta was much further north than Keramzin, the nights were obviously going to be colder even in summer.

“Will you be here in the morning?” she asked, half asleep already but trying to stay awake to feel him stroking her back, the way their breath was almost synchronized, the way it felt like their hearts were beating together.

“I expect so. Fedyor and Zenaida will hopefully give us that much, and the tsar will be too upset that I outwitted him to summon us so soon.”

“Outwitted? How?” He had mentioned this before but she hadn’t asked him to elaborate. *Because you don’t want to know or because you didn’t want to give him a reason to leave you behind?* something sinister whispered in her mind, something she beat back fiercely because she would have to find her happiness as Ana Kuya had said.

“I think his advisers put the idea into his head so that they could either get a spy into my rooms or rearrange some of the leverage they have. They likely had a plan on how to do it, too, only I asked that I be allowed to make my own choice, was granted the same, and left before they could start in on me. Women from noble families would have been put forward, or the daughters of rich merchants, or even a lady from another country that the Crown would like to make nice with—give them a high-ranked nobleman’s hand, even if that nobleman has only a residual title these days with no land to accompany it, and in turn hopefully get a few more shadow summoners out of the deal. Shadow summoners who can be molded and more easily directed than the curmudgeon they currently find themselves saddled with.” *And then when they have their little shadows under control they dispose of the shadow they hate and fear,* Alina realized, sleep fleeing at the idea that they meant to kill Aleksander if they could. She couldn’t say that though, the walls had ears and he was talking as freely as he probably could.

“By giving in this time you know that they’ll just try harder once I’m gone, you’ve bought yourself—”

“Time, Alina, and it isn’t so bad. When you get to be as old as I am you see these kinds of things more often than not, and I have you now.”

*I won’t last,* she thought, tensing up.

“Don’t think that way, I can see it on your face my dear.”

“I’ll try,” she mumbled, turning her face a bit to catch her forehead on his lips. It wasn’t a kiss, but it was enough.

Aleksander’s predictions that the tsar would be too upset to even summon them to present Alina at court were for naught.

They ate yesterday’s supper for breakfast the next morning, lingering over the food as much as they could, before a maid and a footman entered with a set of fresh clothing for each of them followed quickly by an older woman with a shock of blonde hair pulled into a tight bun.

“Zenaida, good morning, please meet Madam Kirigan,” Aleksander was quick to introduce them, and the woman gave Alina a respectful curtsey. She wore a blue kefta with red

embroidery—an inferni.

“General, Madam, good morning. Everyone has been eagerly awaiting your return, would you be able to meet them before going to your audience with Tsar Vasily later today?” Aleksander stilled and a muscle worked in his jaw for half a moment. Her husband was not a man who danced willingly on strings, nor one who enjoyed it.

“Of course. Have everyone assemble in the yellow ballroom in an hour, and see if the teachers at the school will let the young ones come too. Thank you Zenaida,” he said, his words easy and unaffected, *General Kirigan* oozing out of his skin as he spoke. Aleksander, *her Aleksander*, resurfaced after the inferni left the room and he pulled her to her feet so they could comb their hair and dress in the mercifully clean outfits that had been laid out on their bed. The dress Alina had worn for their wedding had been washed and pressed. Her lace veil had been draped over the back of one of the chairs and she was seized with a burst of mischief.

“Can I wear that?” she pointed at the lace without artifice as Aleksander helped button her dress closed. He must have looked up to see where she pointed because he hummed a moment, continuing his task with less focus than before, and when the last button was closed he sighed, “of course, my dear,” before going to retrieve it and help her pin it into her hair again, carefully folding it at her hairline in that old country style that he had at the wedding, something unreadable flickering on his features as he did so. Alina let him be, focusing instead on fastening his kefta and straightening the high collar—they’d done a good job starching it in the laundry, understandably far more familiar with how to treat the corecloth than the laundry at Keramzin had been.

Then it was back down a set of stairs, these ones wider and more public than the ones of yesterday, and Aleksander effortlessly navigated them through the maze-like interior of the Little Palace to what he’d called the yellow ballroom. There, standing organized by their orders, nearly all of the Grisha living at the Little Palace greeted them as one. There was an expectant pause as all eyes turned to her, dressed in her wedding clothes and the sensible boots she’d worn for the journey to Os Alta. Nothing silken or ostentatious save for the lace veil perched on her head, *I am not some queen to lord myself over them, keep them at my beck and call.* It must have brought their audience up a little short, though, for no one said it but: Aleksander was treated as a king by the Grisha more than anything and it was one of the reasons that Tsar Vasily had flexed his power against his shadow summoner. Alina was suddenly glad she was wearing the beautiful lace veil.

“Allow me to introduce my wife, Madam Kirigan, lately of Keramzin. Though she is an otkazat’sya I expect you all to show her your every respect as my wife.” A wave of bows followed, some immediate and attentive, others with a questioning hesitance, and even some with a defiant edge that reminded her to keep her guard up until she could differentiate between friend and foe. Some girls from the orphanage had nasty in-laws or antagonistic step-children saddled on them the moment the church clerk finished blotting the ink dry. What were these Grisha but in-laws of a certain type? She kept herself steady, neither lifting her chin in superiority nor lowering it to her chest in meek submission.

"I am glad to be introduced to all of you, it is very kind to take time from your day for me and I appreciate it. Thank you," her words had some faces relaxing and even a smile from a few people in purple keftas.

"Anton, where is Genya?" Aleksander's voice suddenly cut through the slight thaw in the room, his expression hard. One of the men, wearing a vivid purple kefta where he stood next to Zenaida, Ivan, and Fedyor, coughed and suddenly couldn't meet Aleksander's eyes. Alina stood very still, trying to become invisible until she could figure out what was going on.

"The Grand Palace—"

"She is corporalki, a Tailor, and she is supposed to be here. She is to learn her craft among her people," Aleksander did not so much hiss as growl, his anger directed not at his Grisha but at the royals in their palace across the grounds.

"The Tsaritsa—"

"Gave her up, as a favor to her husband. To help convince me to marry. Genya belongs here."

Alina squeezed his arm as his voice rose, no longer growling but snarling with anger. She wondered who Genya was—his lover? His child? It didn't matter, he needed to collect himself immediately. When he ignored her silent attempt at getting him to do so, she took it into her own hands.

"Then let us fetch her," she said, her eyes not quite meeting his, her doubts still loud in her heart. Her voice carried, despite her not meaning it to. Their audience grew so quiet a raindrop would have echoed. Aleksander's dark eyes lost some of their rage at her words, she could see the gears turning in his mind and pushed her luck further.

"He wants me presented today, and we should remind him of his promises." Only because she was so close did she see a moment of anguish pass on his face. So that was it. He had obeyed a king before, asked a favor in return, and had been betrayed. He was still injured and this ripped open the old wound some how.

"You keep yours," she added, her words only for him this time, her voice barely audible, "I can't undo the past, but let me help now." A muscle relaxed in his jaw at that and she saw him calm himself, put on the unaffected mask once more. She did not relish making him do so, bottling up feelings like that could not do anyone any good, but it was necessary right now. He could have his emotional breakdown in private with only her to witness it—it had been one of the rules she and Mal had lived by growing up in the orphanage, to never let the bullies see them cry.

"It has been too long since we have thanked the Crown for their generosity," he said, tearing his eyes away from hers, "if each order could spare three or four of their number for the afternoon I would be grateful." Alina stayed quiet after his announcement, waiting at his side as the Grisha busied themselves whispering and debating who would go with them to the Grand Palace. She was still tired and achy from the journey, despite sleeping well, but this was nothing new really and she knew it wasn't time to relax quite yet. Whoever Genya was she hoped that an *otkazat'sya* nearly swaying on her feet wouldn't be a disappointment.

*What if she is his lover? a jealous and anxious voice crept into her thoughts again, look at these women, you think he hasn't had at least one of them?*

"Alina," Aleksander drew her from her dark thoughts, his head bowed just a little to look better into her eyes. She had to—even if it burst the charmed bubble they'd had the night before and this morning.

"Is—is she—" *Saints, why is this so hard?*

"Later, I promise. Do you feel well enough?"

"I'm not made of glass," she said, feeling waspish and hating herself for it—though she tried to keep her tone as teasing as she could manage, not letting the mulish orphan take over. Her husband sighed and pressed a kiss to her forehead at the hairline, his nose just touching the lace of her veil.

"You are not, I agree. I say—mulberry paper, from Carveya. You can see through glass after all." Alina gaped at him and elbowed his rib immediately. He absorbed the blow with a barely there grunt and narrowing of his eyes. *Alina*, those eyes warned, but there was no heat to the warning.

The walk to the Grand Palace was longer than she would have liked. The two palaces had looked closer together when they'd first reached the outskirts of Os Alta yesterday, but it felt like it was more than a mile now that they had to walk there. She and Aleksander walked behind the Grisha who had been selected to go with them, some kind of Grisha hierarchy nonsense that she did not pay too much attention to. Alina took the time to look around the grounds, mentally choosing avenues and walks she would like to explore later. She also tried to keep her judgment silent as she saw the gaudy and disorganized opulence turned to rotting decadence of the Grand Palace itself. She thought she'd done a fairly good job of it, too, as Aleksander put his hand over hers where it rested on his elbow. A glance up at him showed the same impassive face of General Kirigan—save for his wink, so short it was almost imagined. Alina winked back—they could not tease or indulge in sarcasm aloud, their mission and their surroundings precluding that kind of intimacy or frankness, but he saw her and she saw him in turn.

The Grand Palace was, in her limited experience, the ugliest building she had never seen. As they were shown into the palace and guided to an antechamber—to await when the tsar would deign to allow them in for their audience with him—Alina's opinion did not improve of the Crown. She had helped keep Duke Keramazov's accounts, had seen the taxes he owed and surrendered to the tsar every year. She had somehow thought that that money went to *something*. To soldiers like Mal and his fellow trackers. Not to filigreed doors and gleaming parquet floors. She felt sick, something building up in her that she fought hard to tamp down. Alina would not have her first real impression with the tsar and tsaritsa be a butler or maid saying that Madam Kirigan had thrown up in a flower vase.

"Alya?" Aleksander wasn't quite looking at her, not drawing any attention to her predicament, but she felt all of his focus zeroed in on her nonetheless.

“I’m fine,” she lied swallowing thickly a few times, “I’m fine. I promise.” She managed not to twitch away from him when he reeled her close to kiss her, just an innocent and sweet one, but she felt better almost immediately. *Walk with me for the time you have*, she remembered, his words so earnest in the sunlight.

“Thank you,” she whispered as one of the footmen—he looked like a footman at least—announced that the royal couple would see them now. She clenched her teeth and plastered her best attempt at a bland haughty expression on her face, one shamelessly stolen from Ivan. Ivan hated her but he worked hard not to show it. She wasn’t sure, of course, but she’d felt enough veiled hatred that she knew what it looked like. The Duchess had been her benchmark master, until Alina had accepted Ivan’s well-wishes for her marriage when it was announced that she’d accepted Aleksander’s suit. If Ivan could get away with it she decided she could too.

Besides, if she fell flat on her face she could lean hard on “country orphan without any etiquette training,’ in a pinch.

The throne room was like a miasma of everything she’d seen so far and it was only Aleksander twining their fingers together that kept her from forgetting herself and losing control of her stomach. People were regularly counting spongy potatoes and apples each spring to see if they could make it until their sweet onions were ready to harvest, while their tsar lived *like this*.

She ignored the courtiers who peered curiously at her as they passed, her inner anger and turmoil carefully hidden from them. Alina’s grip on Aleksander’s hand was bruising but it was her only outlet and her only expression. He didn’t take his hand from hers though, so she supposed it was alright.

They managed the introduction well enough, the tsaritsa directing her attendant to greet Alina in Shu and tittering when Alina replied in Old Ravkan. Let the woman believe what she would about that. Glancing at the jewels nested two layers thick around her neck and through her hair, Alina held back a rebuke. She’d grown up in an orphanage half-supported by the lord of the *Little* Palace not the lord of the *Grand* one.

“My husband informed me to thank you, *moya Tsaritsa*,” Alina said, continuing this time in modern Ravkan, “for your generosity in sending your Tailor to work in the Little Palace in my household. I have not met her yet, but General Kirigan has assured me I will soon. You are very gracious to think of me.” The tsaritsa, a Fjerdan noblewoman born Katinka Falksten but named Ekaterina on her marriage to Vasily Lantsov, was taken by surprise but she rallied gracefully enough.

“It has been a few years since I myself traveled a long way to marry and live with my husband, Madam Kirigan. It is my pleasure to make you welcome, and I hope that Genya serves you as faithfully as she has me.”

Alina thought she did Ana Kuya proud with the curtsy she gave as they were dismissed. At the top of the stairs a set of footmen escorted a young woman Alina’s age to wait for them. She had striking red hair and was dressed in a kefta done up in the cream of the palace

servants, not the vivid ruby of the corporalki. No one said a word as she fell in with them, just behind Alina, and the group remained silent for the whole walk back to the Little Palace.

While they had walked at the back of the group on the way to the Grand Palace, they walked at the front now with Aleksander leading them back to the yellow ballroom of the morning. Alina's death-grip on his hand lessened with every step deeper into the Little Palace but she did not let him go until they were gathered once again with the rest of his Grisha. Genya stood before them, her back to the other Grisha, orphaned in her white and cream kefta.

"Madam Kirigan, meet Miss Safin." Genya bowed quickly with a murmured greeting. Alina smiled, trying to be at ease on Aleksander's arm with so many eyes on her. Those defiant looks from earlier in the day did not need to see her flinch now.

"A servant no more," Alina said impulsively, taking the chance that this was what her husband had meant earlier in the day in his anger, "a pleasure to meet you, Miss Safin."

When she finished speaking the corporalki around them flooded forward as though she'd given them permission to do so, led by Fedyor and a fat young woman that Genya greeted with a happy cry of *Nina!*—the woman shrugged out of her kefta and put it around Genya's shoulders, grinning and cupping the redhead's face in her hands. Genya had tears in her eyes when the hugs, now from the materialki and the etherealki too, subsided.

"Moi soverennyi," she said now, coming forward to them when Aleksander beckoned her. He also cupped her face, like an affectionate parent, before turning slightly to Alina.

"Genya, let me introduce you to my wife Alina. Alina, Genya is a Tailor—a rare ability indeed, but no less a Grisha for it. I hope you can be friendly faces to one another here in the Little Palace." The tears were back in Genya's eyes and Aleksander let her lean against him as she tried and failed to smother a huge sob. He rested his chin on the top of her head, heedless of those now bustling around them—some returning to their chores or lessons, others taking a break and chatting together. A few curiously looking at Alina still.

"You're never going back. You will have a room in the corporalki wing, as you should have always had. I'm sorry it took so long, I'm sorry."

"I just—when Pyotr died I thought—I thought—"

"I know. I did too. I should have known better."

The way Aleksander spoke sent a chill down Alina's spine. The way the tsaritsa had assumed she spoke Shu. The opulence of the palace. And now, this soft conversation filled with the edges of broken glass and poisonous weeds—all of it pointed to the Grand Palace as a place of danger. She didn't want to intrude, she had tried not to seem too aloof or to be eavesdropping, but Aleksander soon pinned her with his dark, dark eyes and she felt compelled to speak.

"I did not come here for a place at court, certainly not if fifteen Grisha have to go to rescue one of their own," she said, not quietly, not caring who heard her, ignoring Aleksander's warning look until it hardened, forcing her to change course quickly, "I am also often ill, as

you know, General Kirigan, and not suited to the rigors of court life. Please, tell me how I might communicate this to the tsaritsa."

## Chapter End Notes

As I was writing the 'second' chapter I realized that I had probably 40 pages of hand written fic, so please do expect another chapter in the future. I can't say when, but hopefully a little sooner than it took this one to come out.

Alina's riding cape is based on this but in white & gold:

<https://images.app.goo.gl/8sKKPkLXez2sGjM38> (hopefully that one works, I don't think it will)

Also Alina's veil is based on this but with like...the white & blue reversed? I made it up in my head and then panicked and looked for something like it so confirmation bias babey: <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/157570>

And the moment I was trying to accomplish with the veil lifting bit was straight out of this scene from Jodhaa Akbar: <https://youtu.be/QiWUy8fcA5g?t=228>

And I also learned that the first liquid soap was made in 1865, so I'm taking that and running with it (it wasn't for household use, but it existed during a similar time period as the show is sort of set in, is the thing and we have Fabrikators)

I thrive on comments, so please let me know how you liked this & any favorite parts you might have. I definitely have a favorite line of my own, so I'm excited to see if anyone catches it!

# Blended Sunrise, Dazzled by the New

## Chapter Summary

"Now I must tell you things I've kept from you. Grisha nonsense." His attempt at levity didn't fall flat so much as alarm her. His next words filled her with a kind of creeping dread she had never encountered with him: "but also some things about me that no one knows, not even you my dear."

Or: Alina's eleven years of being the otkazat'sya wife of General Kirigan, the famed shadow summoner, and the revelation that she herself is a myth made flesh

## Chapter Notes

Huge thank you for the love that some of my snippets have been getting on the darklina server, I love all of you so dearly for the care you show every day.

Lyrics of the chapter titles are from "Strangers when we meet" by David Bowie

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Alina quickly learned she did not like court. A woman like her was not welcome there, not really. The tsar disliked her for her frailty, the ladies of the court disliked that she stood in their path to throwing themselves at Aleksander, and the military commanders were unable to see past her Shu heritage. The Grisha on the other hand were fascinated with her. When it became known—how could it not, with half a dozen sets of riders sent back and forth from Keramzin and Os Alta—she came from Keramzin the Grisha from there had been bombarded with questions about the place and if anyone knew anything about Alina herself.

If they had felt any consternation at seeing her in the flesh, or any suspicion towards her, they had for the most part concealed it well enough by the time she settled in at the Little Palace. Alina spent the first few weeks—well, months, really—reading every book she touched as she tried to find a new rhythm to her life. She willed herself not to be bored and gradually she made a place for herself. She rose early each day and breakfasted with Aleksander in their rooms. Alina still had little appetite for the most part but curled up in his arms sometimes seemed to kindle an actual desire for food—and he was always pleased to let her sneak bites of his meals if it meant she was eating more. They stayed close until his duties called for his attention, after which she would dress for the day in earnest.

Genya was the most constant companion she had, after Ivan and Fedyor, but even she left for large stretches of time—Alina still did not know quite what the woman's relationship was to

her husband. Aleksander had made sure Genya was finally allowed to formally learn with the other Grisha. A royal servant no longer, in truth. Alina followed her one day, peeking in to see the children in Genya's class—*the queen did not allow me to continue, I don't mind starting over*, she'd said with a sparkling laugh when Alina had asked her if she minded. Watching them now, Alina felt a pang in her gut.

She did want children but had thought it a remote, and improbable, idea in Keramzin with no husband or sweetheart. Then—well, she was still a little wary of the idea, because if she mothered Aleksander's children it would be playing into the tsar's hands. Alina did not want her children, imagined as they were now, at the hands of the royal family the way that Genya had been. Aleksander had promised that would not happen but *the king is still the king* loomed over them, the echoes of the statement resounding. Vasily had commanded his shadow summoner to marry and now Alina was introduced as Madam Kirigan. Aleksander, she was certain, would keep his word. That was something immutable. It was also something she feared. She feared what he might *do* to keep his word. So she peeked at the little Grisha—Genya among them, glowing with pleasure at *being* there—and wished for but hoped against such a future. They would have dark hair, though if their dark eyes took after hers or her husband's would be left up to the Saints—if they ever came into existence. She had turned away from the little classroom, then, and hurried on to her day's tasks.

Even with her secret wish, there was still Genya to consider. It was obvious that the two cared for one another in a way that wasn't evident in any of their other relationships with the residents of the Little Palace. Alina would lay awake at night watching Aleksander sleep, wondering. It ate at her. How could she ask? If she had read the situation wrong, would he forgive her? If she had read it *right* would he humiliate her with gentle words assuring her it wasn't her fault? He certainly seemed to prefer sleeping here in their rooms, but was that only a temporary arrangement to lull the tsar into believing he'd had his way?

How long it might have gone on she didn't know except one afternoon Genya cornered her and made her tell her. They were in Genya's little room in the corporalki wing, sitting at Genya's small table with the remnants of a bowl of cherries pushed to the side.

"I was worried you would be mad at me," Alina finally admitted, "for...for being me. He told me not to apologize, but..." she knew as well as anyone, now, that you could not help sometimes who you ended up caring about.

"Alina...I..." Genya's eyes had welled up with tears to match the ones swimming in Alina's own. The other woman had reached out and patted her cheek, sniffling and looking down for a moment to gather herself.

"He made a mistake years ago, when I was newly arrived here, and I ended up in the service of the previous tsaritsa. By the time he realized the extent of...what was happening...it was too late. We had thought that I would be released when Ekaterina was crowned, but Tatiana just *gave* me to her. Like I was a pet, not a person. He said some unflattering things about marrying an *otkazat'sya*, the night Vasily bullied him, and bargained for my freedom. If you haven't heard this already I will tell you now: he said that he wanted his wife to be as without blemish as Tatiana had always been, and he would have his Tailor back for the job. It was...an ugly moment. He was not at his best, but he was cornered as he so rarely lets himself

become.” Alina stilled, shocked at the image Genya’s words conjured in her mind. It must have been writ large across her face because the Tailor rushed to add, “but you have nothing to worry about from him, or from me. General Kirigan is more like a father to me, to many of us, and he only has eyes for you. If you asked him to pluck a handful of stars to string together like pearls for your hair he might actually try to do it. You have *nothing* to worry about, Alina, believe me.”

They cried a little, together, but when the tears dried they looked at each other with a newfound respect and understanding. Genya’s trust in Aleksander was borne of a lifetime of believing his promises, while Alina’s was borne of his obvious respect for her. Even if he did have a partner, a lover, somewhere in the palace he slept at Alina’s side, took his meals with her when he could. He worked hard to never humiliate her with the things she didn’t know.

“Thank you Genya, I didn’t—just, thank you. Friends?” she held her hand out, her pinky out the way her mother had taught her, the reason only half-remembered now, only that it was important. Genya, worldly from the court, easily looped her own pinky with Alina’s without questioning it.

“Friends,” Genya said, a warm smile spreading over her beautiful face. They were, aside from Genya’s lessons and other obligations, inseparable from then on. Wherever Genya was, Alina often tagged along in the places she was welcome. There were other cares she turned her mind to, other fears, but this at least was no longer one of them. Alina might have kept on doing just that, ghosting along after Genya and worrying for her own future, but for a new arrival tugging at her skirts one morning. A nine or ten year old boy, hair as red as a carrot, a durast by his purple tunic, looked up at her with teary eyes.

“Madam Darkling, ma’am, I—I don’t remember the way to—I don’t—” he fought against the tears in his eyes, and Alina was reminded powerfully of Mal, frightened but trying not to show it. Trying to be brave and sure.

“What is your name, little one?” Alina said, crouching down to meet his eyes. Brown, warmer than Aleksander’s, and flecked with hazel.

“Casimir, Madam—”

“You can call me Alina, Casimir,” she interrupted him, not wanting to hear a child call her the cruel nickname bestowed on Aleksander. Grisha were hated enough without sowing fear and resentment among one another. Casimir hesitated though and Alina gave him an out—

“Or Madam Kirigan, if you prefer,” he nodded at that, relief evident on his face, “where do you need to go? I’m still new here too, so we can say I made you late.”

Haltingly the boy said he was to be with Master Kostyk, identifying metals by touch and sound, for an hour before going to the training yard for the afternoon to run and play with his age mates. He was already late for meeting with Master Kostyk and he didn’t want to disappoint him.

“Well, little one, let’s get you to Master Kostyk. I won’t let him blame you, if he’s upset, alright?” Casimir blinked away his tears and nodded, taking her hand when she offered it.

She was able to guide them without error and the durast was quite happy to see them. He had only just realized his student was missing and had been trying to decide what to do himself. The next few days passed as before, laughing with Genya on their way to Genya's lessons, spending time plotting out a garden to plant for the spring, reading, and continuing to carve out a household to run for Aleksander. The man lived like a nomad, leaving Ivan to be the one who had to bicker with servants and retainers alike, things it was well enough for a bachelor to delegate to a trusted lieutenant but ultimately were under the purview of a wife's duties. If Aleksander was aware of the silent power struggle under his nose he did not wade into it, which Alina appreciated immensely.

At Genya's lesson today though a few children waited outside—obviously having dawdled after their own lesson had concluded. Casimir was the ringleader, she noted, a little confused as they all stared up at her expectantly. Their little faces were so serious that she wanted to kneel down and pinch a few cheeks, despite how poorly she knew that would be received—she had never enjoyed it when adults did it at the orphanage when they were looking for a child to take home, she doubted these powerful children would either.

"Will you walk us to Baghra's, Madam Kirigan?" Casimir asked, his high voice quaking just a bit on Baghra's name. A small chorus lit up after his question—"Please?" "If you have the time, would you? Please Madam Kirigan?" Alina felt out of her depth—she had not met Baghra beyond being shouted at through a door a week after arriving at the Little Palace. Aleksander had taken her to where the old woman lived in a hut on the grounds, saying they might as well get over the worst part sooner than later. That he viewed the visit with less enthusiasm than meeting with the tsar he hated told Alina more than he knew. Baghra was a shadow summoner too, though she did not share that with almost anyone, and was distantly related to Aleksander himself—as all shadow summoners had been, all descending from a single cursed line.

The old woman had yelled through the door that she would not pay heed to the mongrel *otkazat'sya*, to not waste both their time with trying to attempt another introduction. Alina distinctly felt that by *both* the woman had meant Baghra herself and Aleksander. Alina did not merit even a word edgewise in the woman's mind and Alina had worked hard to move past that rejection. It was the worst one she had felt since arriving and she was glad every day that it remained the high water mark of distrust and anger directed towards her.

The children though were Grisha, they did not deserve to be put through the divide between Alina and their teacher. They looked at her so earnestly—

"I will walk as far as the path off the gravel walkway. Baghra would not want an—an *otkazat'sya* to know all your secrets." The children cheered, it was obviously more than they had let themselves expect it seemed. Alina took Casimir's hand and led the way, concealing how her feet hurt as her silken slippers did nothing to protect her from the gravel covered walks of the grounds. She would have to wear boots, if they asked her again.

"Thank you, Madam Kirigan," a little girl in a blue tunic said, hugging herself around Alina's legs when they reached the path to Baghra's hut. She blinked away tears and rested her hand on soft blonde curls.

"Of course, little one, now run along. Mustn't be late to Baghra, you all know that."

Later on, evening shadows creeping around them in their bed, Aleksander brought it up. She smiled at how offhand he tried to seem, but she'd expected that the news would get to him sooner or later. Very little went on in his palace that he didn't become aware of. It was what kept little boys like Casimir safe, so she couldn't be upset at him for his spies.

"They didn't bother you, did they?"

"No," she replied, kissing his forehead, his cheek, ghosting his lips, "they were angels. Casimir, the durast, was the leader. I helped him find his way last week, though today they all knew full well where they were going. I can't say I blame them, wanting someone to go with them, and I've never actually seen the woman."

"I don't—" he still carried anxiety about how quickly they had married, how few other options she had really had available to her, his guilt was a living thing sometimes. Alina didn't wish it on anyone, and tried to keep him from dwelling on such thoughts when she could.

"I know, but I would like to help. I was once small in a new place, Aleksander." A sudden worry seized her and she pulled away to get a better look at his face. She had avoided blunders for the most part since marrying a Grisha but—

"Unless I am supposed to keep my distance since—I—since I am otkazat'sya." Her husband let the silence linger, looking up at her with eyes so dark they were black in the dimness of their room. They had been married long enough to have a conversation like this like equals, and it was not a conversation to put off for a later time. Things like this had a way of festering in the heart.

"Alina." He finally said, levering himself upright between her knees, sighing as he pulled her close by her hips to sit astride his lap.

"I will strive to always let you know the boundaries of our lives here. I promise. I do not want them to grow up believing all otkazat'sya are as caring as Madam Kirigan is, but neither can I wish them to ignore kindness or be aloof to someone who could offer them aid. I also," he seemed to struggle for words, squeezing her hips and not meeting her eyes. If she didn't know better she might think it boyish, "I also don't want you put in a position you don't want to be in, but feel obligated to perform at. You have a kind heart, my dear, not one I want to see conflicted in that way."

"Oh," she had not thought he would see it that way. It was like playing chess with him sometimes when they spoke, where he saw five moves ahead of her. Part of her disliked that, but another appreciated that he took time to share these thoughts with her. He certainly did not have to, and she had little power to force him to.

"Oh?"

"Aleksander, they are children—under your protection yes—so how could I do other than try to care for them? Besides, how else—" she felt her belly tense with what might happen as soon as she spoke, "how else will I know how to care for our own when they come?"

“Alina—” his face was awash with some kind of wonder, he didn’t seem to know where to look or what to do with his hands. Alina steadfastly ignored the whisper in her heart that the king was still the king and instead took one of her husband’s hands—large, formed under the hard farm labor of his youth and kept beautiful and strong by his summoning—and laid it on her heart.

“It isn’t a future I mapped for myself, but that doesn’t mean I don’t want it, don’t want *you*.” She barely got the words out before he was crushing her to him, kissing her like his life depended on it, and Alina kissed him just as fiercely.

After that night he calmed in a way, seemed more certain with her. In the privacy of his rooms—or when they were alone on the palace grounds—he shared things with her that not even Ivan or Fedyor were aware of. Topics or news that he could not yet burden his Grisha with or plans he had to iron out before letting a whisper of them loose. In turn, Alina became a fixture around the Little Palace when she wasn’t with Aleksander. She replaced half her wardrobe with sensible trousers, tunics, and overcoats. She only wore her truly beautiful and elegant dresses when Genya would tip her off that they were required for some function or other. When she met newly arrived Grisha it was dressed in a simple matron’s dress or more often in her trousers and coat, her hand in Aleksander’s as he greeted the newcomers formally as his people—while Alina herself knelt down to chat with the youngest of them, when there were children.

Her heart ached terribly when the children started to call her *Madraya*. She was sure Casimir’s friend Petya dared him to start it, given that he became her little shadow as much as he could each day. The first time he had said it she had only just avoided bursting into tears when she realized he truly meant *her*. Alina could never understand—the children could not have realized her feelings on the matter—but it was a term of real affection and respect coming from Casimir’s sweet little voice, and it still reminded her of what she had thought she’d given up when agreeing to the Duke’s contract for work at the manor. No one called Ana Kuya *madraya* no matter how well she did or did not treat them. It was something that Aleksander had hopefully given back to her, tangible now as Casimir started routinely calling her that and the other children followed his lead.

Petya and Casimir were the first, but not the last, and playing mother to young Grisha took up more and more of her days, sometimes even her nights—much to Aleksander’s chagrin one evening as they shared a bath. He had been kissing her shoulders and neck as the water cooled around them, when one of the young squallers had gone to a guard on duty in the hall and asked her to get *madraya* because of a bad dream. It was perhaps the only time in almost two years that she saw Aleksander frustrated at something one of his Grisha had done. The girl, Anastasia, was seven and was getting a little too big to gather up in her arms, but Alina commandeered the chair in Aleksander’s study to cuddle and coddle the girl into going back to sleep. She only just felt the blanket that Aleksander settled over them before she slipped off to sleep herself. She woke up midmorning in bed, her arms empty.

“We tried to wake you, but you needed the rest I think,” her husband’s voice, hushed and concerned though he disguised it well, “and Anastasia said thank you, before Zenaida herded her down to breakfast.”

“She—” Alina yawned, stretching and feeling her bones crackle and pop like sap in a fire, “she said one of the inferni, *no* she did not tell me who, said that the Black Heretic would send the Fold after her family for daring to name her in King Anastas’ honor. The inferni said that was why no other Grisha here are called that.”

Aleksander looked like he’d had his hand shoved in a fire as she spoke. He had moved some of his work to their room to make some headway while staying nearby as she slept. The sheet of paper in his fingers trembled before he let it fall from nerveless fingers. Alina dragged herself up and went to him, perching on his lap and carding his hair back and off his forehead.

“I asked her where she is from, she said Tsemna, and I asked her to remind me how long she’d been here. She eventually decided for herself that the other child was not telling the truth. Brave little thing also asked if you would keep the Black Heretic away, if she asked nicely.” The words seemed to hit him like arrows.

“Of course I would,” he managed to say, his words barely more than a murmur, his voice distant and shaken. His arms around her clutched her closer, and she wished she could do something about the hollow look his eyes took on, one Alina faintly remembered on her mother’s face when talk of Shu Han had cropped up in the neighborhood they lived in when —well, in West Ravka.

“Aleksander?”

He still stared into some middle distance she couldn’t begin to fathom. Alina curled her head under his chin, still drowsy, and closed her eyes, waiting.

“They—they shouldn’t say such things to each other. Being Grisha—it’s more than, than *anything*. It’s more than names, or borders or gender or desire. Alya—” he spoke fast, like a dam was breaking.

“They are children, Sasha,” she said, trying in vain to find better words before she spoke, forcing out the few that did come.

“Children grow, my dear.”

He sounded so old and tired that Alina’s eyes grew hot with tears, mourning whatever he had gone through that had him so jaded. It was not hers to bear or to heal, though, so she let him hold her and allowed the quiet to reign over them for now. Eventually Aleksander went back to his work, one arm wrapped around her lower back, his hand splayed on her hip, the other sifting through his papers. Alina let herself drift, focusing occasionally on a few documents he asked for her opinion on here and there, taking the morning to attempt to recuperate from a night half-spent in a chair.

“Are the children taught of the Black Heretic, Aleksander?” she asked after their lunch was set out. Bread, cold chicken, and soft farmer’s cheese accompanied by an herbal tea that was intolerable except with the addition of copious amounts of sugar. Alina had grinned as her husband dropped yet another spoonful into her teacup, admonishing him with a look she had

patented from Ana Kuya. That grin and the arch look, both teasing and happy, were now gone, replaced by a cautious curiosity.

“Nothing, beyond what we teach of the Fold itself. They must know a little of how it was made and that must include *who*.”

“I cannot say it will fix what happened to Anastasia, but the Black Heretic—I was always taught that the Fold was a mistake. It was some kind of weapon that did not get used correctly and killed him—the shadows are all his, but they don’t have *him* to go back into. Maybe if the children know more of him they would be less frightened, and more careful in their own studies.”

Aleksander stared at her like she had poured his inkwell over her head. Somewhere between poleaxed and perplexed. Had her brilliant husband truly never thought of this? Feeling awkward and wanting to do something with her hands while he mulled over her words, Alina spread a bit of cheese over her bread, took a bite and savored the salt. Her husband watched her eat, silent and contemplative.

“Our own...theories...and what amounts to the family lore of past shadow summoners, says it was less a mistake and more an accident,” he murmured, his gaze a thousand miles away, “but no one ever wants to hear that from the shadow summoner, so we do not focus so much on it.” There were things that Aleksander didn’t burden her with because there wasn’t a need to. He was not exactly asking for a solution, she knew that, and the topic clearly pained him on a personal level. But Alina was looking at the problem with relatively fresh eyes, without the stunting effect of being affected by all aspects *of* the problem. The distance, she liked to think, afforded some clarity.

“I can teach it to them. You know that I read to the little ones, when they ask. It would not be outrageous to tell them of the Fold. Teach them something about it. It would mean that none of your Grisha are asked to defend the—well—if their heart isn’t in it. And then a few generations will grow up with those lessons in their hearts. I won’t live to see if it works, but maybe you will?”

Aleksander sipped his tea, his body still and coiled like a snake, but she saw his mind continuing to turn the idea over. Alina ate another piece of bread and then some chicken—wishing it was as flavorful as the cheese, but the hint of rosemary and lemon would have to be enough.

“I—I must think on it, my dear,” he said, meeting her eyes when he realized she was waiting for his answer. He reached over and squeezed her hand before quickly finishing his food—and stealing the rest of her tea, nearly untouched since he had dumped all that sugar into it. Alina grinned at him, tilting her face up for a kiss when he got up to leave the table for his afternoon briefing with the king. She lingered over the food—Fedyor was always pushing the limits of Aleksander’s rules (*the Grisha shall eat simple fare, the food of the poorest in Ravka*) with what he arranged for the meals his general shared with her, so she did make an effort to eat even when she had no appetite. If Fedyor was willing to get in trouble she owed it to him to have had it be worthwhile.

It took Aleksander a few months to truly warm up to the idea, and even more to approve of it. Alina had the feeling he had been badly startled by her words and she let him be. Like Fedyor, she pushed the envelope and *if* children asked *her* about the Black Heretic or the Fold she told them what Ana Kuya had told her. Let their teachers correct the words of a sickly otkazat'sya but she would not let the idea take hold that the Black Heretic would harm even a hair on their heads. Mostly, she thought to herself, because the man was most assuredly dead, but also because no child deserved that kind of looming specter over their dreams.

"Alina," Aleksander's voice behind her startled her and she nearly jumped off the low stool in her garden. She had been gathering spinach and ramps to dry ahead of the winter. The spinach was to be made into a horrid tea that nonetheless was sword by among the oprichniki as effective against long night watches in the icy wind. Alina rather thought it was because of the truly nasty aftertaste and the heat of the water, but she was happy enough to grow it for them. They kept her loved ones safe, and spinach was easy to keep. The ramps could be mashed into a poultice with cloves, turmeric, and ground willow bark into an effective deterrent to infection and fever. Ana Kuya had always lamented the lack of turmeric for her recipe, and now Alina understood her gripes. Grisha were rarely ill, but her husband—now chuckling as he came to squat next to her, popping a few bits of spinach into his mouth as he did—had been letting her teach her craft to those who would learn. Healers were not always close to hand, after all.

"Your idea is a good one, my love," he said, one hand idly reaching to lift up the undergrowth of her plants, picking at tiny weeds concealed there and tossing them into a pile. His other hand gripped her thigh just above her knee, steadyng his balance.

"And you will have your way regardless, I've now learned. I want you to start taking a role in helping Grisha new to the Little Palace settle in. Obviously, their lieutenants and captains will take the bulk of their first few months and guide them, but I want them to also learn from you. I am unsure of the wisdom of telling them the Fold was an accident but I do not want the past to stalk them like it does now. And I think—having them help you out here will give you the privacy to tell them away from Vasily's spies."

"May I still take the youngest ones to and from their lessons?"

Aleksander huffed a laugh, squeezing her thigh as he stood back up, dusting his hand off absently on his trouser leg. She missed his warmth immediately, and the intimate feeling of watching him tend her garden. He was a better gardener than her, which still caused her to smile when thinking about the sum of things that made him *him*. A man of contradictions on top of contradictions, but also the son of a farmer from a forgotten little town near the Fold.

"What a rebellion I would start if I made you stop that, my dear," he said, pulling her to her feet. Alina couldn't help looking at him in askance, and he clarified his words with a smile—pulling her closer, hands warm as they spanned her ribs, a playful little grin touching his lips as he looked down his nose at her.

"The children would never stand for it, I would bring my doom about my own ears."

"Foolish man," she whispered, giggling when he wrapped his arms around her tighter, hugging her close and lifting her feet off the ground to press his forehead to hers. They

shared a few breaths like that, eyelashes fluttering together, the side of his nose resting against hers. When he set her back on her feet she tugged him down with her to peck a kiss to his mouth before turning to gather up her small harvest, folding up her stool and letting Aleksander tuck it under one arm while his free hand sought hers. *It should not be difficult to get him to be sweet to you*, Ana Kuya had told her. Alina sighed, content if a bit weary, and rested her head on his shoulder as they walked.

Her scheme, if it could be called that, seemed to work faster than either of them had anticipated. Over a few years it began to be silently accepted knowledge among the young and newer Grisha that the Fold had been an accident. A cautionary tale, not one to glory in, but no longer a source of guilt or shame. Alina sat with the children, watching them tend her garden when she was too ill to do it, answering their questions and consoling their heartaches. She held their hands if they were ill and gave them willow tea when growing pains came knocking. Most of the high ranking Grisha trusted her implicitly, only Ivan held out on his opinion of her. Alina had hoped that after more than five years the man would have warmed to her *a little*.

Ivan often quizzed her about each day, looking for even little white lies which made him turn on his heel and go to Aleksander. Her husband, Saints bless his soul, asked if she wanted him to reassign Ivan, to put some distance between them. Alina declined each time he hinted at it, knowing Ivan might serve Aleksander for far longer than Alina herself would live—and she owed it to her husband not to sow seeds of discord in the far future. She assumed, as she and Aleksander celebrated six years together, that that was just how things would stay.

That was, until Polina and Pawel had returned from a dangerous mission to Ketterdam bringing a dozen Grisha back with them. Aleksander was in a meeting with commanders in the First Army which could not be disturbed—the tsar had absented himself, as usual, but decisions and strategy had to be made and talked of even without him—so it fell to Alina and Ivan to meet the new Grisha. She took Ivan’s arm when he offered it, presenting a united front as always despite any personal feelings between them. As they walked Ivan briefed her on what the twins had found. A merchant had quietly rounded up these Grisha and sold them when his debts knocked on his door—some to Shu Han, others to the Kaelish, some quietly to other wealthy people in Kerch. The ones Polina and her brother had taken were all that were left. A fabrikator informant had smuggled a message out to Ravka months ago—they stayed anonymous, not revealing themselves once aside from proof they were Grisha, but their tip-off had been true enough.

“Is there a faster way for news like this to come to us?” she asked, glancing up at Ivan as they entered the room. Ivan gave her his usual scathing look and stayed silent. He had long thought that Aleksander trusted her too readily with too much, and in response he would choose to clam up if she ever expressed too much curiosity. At first she had borne it with as much equanimity as she could muster—she was a stranger, she was *otkazat’sya*, he would warm to her—only for Ivan to meet her patience with his own. Maybe when she was frail and gray, and salt had just touched *his* hair, Ivan would trust her. Something told her probably not though. Heartrenders were a stubborn lot—the very way a heart would stubbornly beat for decades upon decades.

The survivors, what else could they be, were two healers, three inferni and three tidemakers, a heartrender, a squaller, an alkemi, and a durast—most in their mid-teens save the durast. The little girl, Sofia, had been nearly catatonic the whole journey. They had mercifully made it through the Fold without the girl screaming and bringing the volcra down on them, but it had instead been a struggle to get the child to eat, to walk, to even move. She had never spoken.

“We think—” the heartrender said, fretting and shifting from foot to foot under Ivan’s stare, “we think she saw them kill her family or some other horror, but we can’t be sure. The guards shoved her in with us one day with only a name to call her.”

Alina let go of Ivan’s arm and knelt, her bones aching as she did, in front of Sofia. She sighed, not looking at the little one, stretching and glancing around like they were alone. It was a game of pantomime—one the squaller of Alina’s childhood had taught her as they sipped sweetened milk in the Grisha camp in East Ravka. Alina had only hours before watched volcra carry off all souls aboard the skiff, including her starry-eyed uncle, her clever father, her beautiful mother. *“A pane of glass, or better yet a shutter, draw it closed when you need to, child. If you are wearing a mask take it off then. You don’t have to let me see, but you do have to let yourself see. Like this,”* the squaller herself had probably been in shock but no one else was sparing a thought for the little otkazat’sya, so she had made the effort.

Sofia watched her, green eyes doleful and mouth pressed closed, as Alina went all in with the same charade. As people moved around the room she kept playing pretend and after about ten minutes Sofia sat down in a jumble next to her and then ‘closed’ her own shutters with a small waving hand and once that was done she crawled into Alina’s lap. She didn’t say a word, only tucked her face into Alina’s neck and clung to her there.

The rest of the room fell away as she held the girl, lips pressed occasionally to the top of her head, and hummed a soft tune that Alina’s mother had sometimes sang as she and Alina’s father cleaned the house. Sofia did not drop off to sleep, only fiddled with the buttons on Alina’s greatcoat, tugged on the pendant she wore, held her hand and looked at the wedding ring on her finger.

“Madam Kirigan,” David Kostyk squatted down several feet from them, his voice hardly there as he looked at Sofia, “how is she?” David was not good at feelings for the most part, but he did try. He had been the one to insist that her greatcoats be made of corecloth and fur trimmed for warmth, since she appeared so often with her husband but also chaperoned the younger children around the palace grounds. Her prominence among the Grisha made her a target and he did not want her to be an easy one.

“Sofia, we have a visitor,” Alina said, drawing the girl’s green eyes up to hers, “do you want to meet him? His name is David Kostyk, he made all these buttons you’ve been admiring.” Sofia’s mouth trembled with a little fear but she nodded even as she hugged Alina closer. “Master Kostyk, this is Sofia. Sofia, this is Master Kostyk. He is a durast, like you.” David did something that approximated a bow from his crouched position, and Sofia waved one hand in a short greeting. Her mouth stayed glued shut.

“Ivan said, well, *suggested* we might all have supper sent to my workshop, have some peace and quiet there. What do you think?” he glanced between Alina and Sofia, voice soft and

words tilted low to keep the conversation private. There was little need, most of the others had filed out sometime ago. Alina stroked Sofia's hair, a dirty blonde that would go either way, as she grew, to lovely golden waves or brunette curls.

"What did Ivan say we would have?"

"Probably fresh bread, and there is the apple butter you and Genya put down last fall, and I think there was talk of some roast chicken. Nothing fancy, but hearty."

"What is apple butter?" Sofia asked, tugging on one of the buttons on Alina's tunic. Alina resisted wilting in relief at the sweet, soft voice. Was this what that squaller had felt, years ago, as they recovered together from the journey through the Fold? It didn't matter, though, so Alina explained making the fruit preserve in detail hoping Sofia would agree on her own to go to the workshop of the materialki.

"Can—can Pawel and Polina come?" Alina hid her surprise that Sofia even knew the twins' names, but it pleased her that Sofia had been alert on her journey.

"Of course, dear one," Alina said, kissing Sofia's head and making her way to stand. She accepted David's hand up, his steady grasp a welcome assistance because her vision grayed and blood rushed in her ears for several moments. For a split second she thought she might faint.

"Do I—" David concealed his alarm well.

"No, no, I'm fine. Let's get our supper, I'm sure the twins will love to formally meet you, Sofia."

It wasn't until she limped back to the rooms she shared with Aleksander, an oprichnik supporting her elbow, and let her husband help her undress that Sofia's handiwork was discovered. All the buttons on her tunic and coat had been transformed into the fire-flicker heart style so much preferred in Kerch. Despite his worry at her pain and exhaustion, Aleksander laughed with her as they sat together on their bed, inspecting the buttons closely.

"Will she be alright?" Alina asked.

"Yes, eventually," her husband said, a contemplative swipe across one of the buttons accompanying his words, "they are resilient. Children." Watching him Alina felt like he was showing his age. He'd never truly told her how old he was, but sometimes he felt ancient and eternal to her. Like he'd always lived, and would continue to do so. Tears sprang to Alina's eyes—she could not keep him, nor he her. Without a hint of warning she descended into sobs, quick and ugly things.

"Alina?!"

"I want—I—Sasha," she could hardly get a breath in, panicking and shaking as he quickly gathered her up in his arms. It felt awful, this heartbreak that she hadn't prepared for, not properly at least. She wanted it all. A peaceful life, a home with her love, the warmth of children surrounding them. It felt so *greedy* when she had so much else.

"Alya, my dear, my love, breathe," Aleksander said into her hair, kissing her ear, her neck, murmuring platitudes, stroking her back.

It took several minutes but eventually she cried herself out enough to calm down, to think about what truly bothered her about his words. *She* was one of those resilient children. Orphaned by the Fold. She wanted a family, her own, not to watch them go off to the front when they were deemed ready. Like Mal, like some of the Grisha youth she had befriended or mentored.

"Do you think it is...possible for us to have a family, Sasha?" she whispered, hardly daring to breathe as she asked. They had been mostly careful since their marriage, trying to wait the tsar out of his fascination with getting more shadow summoners out of Aleksander. Not careful to a fault, but—

"I don't see why we can't try, my dear," he said after a lengthy pause. Aleksander drew away just far enough from her embrace to look at her, to stare into her eyes. Neither brought it up that they'd had neither *scares* nor *hopes* over the past six years. Now though—now they would be looking, and hoping that surely the Saints would give them this. She had wondered, once, if they arrived in this place in their marriage, if they would fall on each other like wolves—but instead he held her, stroking her neck, her flank, her hip, and just staring at her intently. Now—it wouldn't be for simple affection or intimacy or relief but—she blushed just thinking of it.

That night they moved together, in love with and in awe of one another, late into the early hours of the morning when the lavender light of dawn was poking at their curtained windows.

How could they have known that her health was about to take a turn and seemingly start to fail? It started with a hard winter where she developed pneumonia—an illness even the healers had trouble ridding her of, and it left her weak for months afterwards. More and more of her time was spent on a little chair that Casimir, now a youth of fifteen with a patchy mustache covering his upper lip, made for her to sit on while the children helped tend her garden. She had to take it slow when walking the little ones between their lessons. These she could deal with, the real battle was behind closed doors with Aleksander. He never, ever, outright said it but he was afraid for her. She had to fight for him not to treat her like she was glass, had to fight off his suggestions of healers and curative spas and remedies imported from Novyi Zem, had to fight to keep him at her side, had to fight to keep him believing that they might have a family of their own, to be her Sasha, not General Kirigan or the Darkling—but *her* Sasha. The stress and pain that radiated from every joint, every muscle, inside her head only made her resolve stronger, fighting tooth and nail for every scrap of life.

She hardly knew how she made it through the banquet that was held for their tenth wedding anniversary. She should have been in bed, even she could admit that, but Alina wanted so badly to go. In an extremely rare move she had Ivan send for Genya and the healer Vanya. The healer did his best to relieve her aches and lethargy, while Genya worked to make Alina's color look less ghastly and her eyes bright with something other than pain. It probably would not fool Aleksander or many of the Grisha, but the spies of the tsar would be none the wiser for a little longer, and Alina would get to go to the party. She had missed the

last Winter Fete, and the celebration of the equinox a few months before—but this day was hers and she *would* have it.

“Do not tell the General that I agreed to let Vanya see me,” she told Ivan as they stood together waiting for Aleksander to return from an errand in the city—he was retrieving a gift for her, she knew, having kissed the information out of him before he left earlier in the day. Ivan murmured an agreement to her request, having become her closest confidant in the last few years. He kept her husband’s counsel, too, but Alina wondered at times like these if Aleksander had lost Ivan’s loyalty. *He will have it back soon enough, I suppose*, she thought, not exactly sadly but resigned to it now.

Vanya and Ivan and Genya—healer, hearttender, tailor—were mystified with her long and increasingly severe illness, and had been for years. Vanya mentioned that it seemed like a cancer, but one he could not find the root of, let alone stem the increase of its reach. Ivan, save for knowing of her two failed tests proving she was *not* Grisha, had once said that she looked like an etherealki who was not using her gift. Genya merely held her hand, not theorizing so much as commiserating. She knew of Alina’s angst at not being able to *do* so many things.

Aleksander was windswept—his hair in disarray and his brow dotted with sweat—as he rode into the courtyard. His grin at seeing Alina upright and out of bed was joyous and made her visit with Vanya worth the discomfort of his healing. Sasha’s steps ate up the distance between them in moments, the reins of his horse tossed to one of the waiting grooms. Like a prince from a fairy story, or a brave soldier come back from war.

“My dear, hello. You didn’t have to wait for me,” he said, enveloping her in his arms and kissing her cheek.

“And miss the afternoon summer sun shining on your hair? You know me better than that I think.” He laughed, bumping his nose to hers once before bringing out a necklace with a pearl pendant hanging from it and pressing it into her hands.

“Sasha, it’s beautiful,” she breathed, touching the pearl with her fingertips. Much of her jewelry was composed of pearls, she would not accept diamonds or other rare gems from him so he was always looking for crystals, worked metals, and most of all—pearls. For their last anniversary he had gifted her a set of Shu hair sticks that draped strands of pearls long enough to touch her shoulders, and before that it had been a set of a hundred hair pins with pearl heads enmeshed in clusters of garnets. Her hair looked spangled with stars and drops of blood when Genya had finished setting her hair with them. They had caused quite a stir at the ball that night—she had worn a crimson and black gown, a living heartbeat as they danced together. Well, as much as Aleksander ever let her dance as her illness progressed.

What no otkazat’sya ever knew, and few Grisha besides, was that she stood on hard shadows and let herself be supported and guided by them. She never missed a step, never ended a vals winded or dizzy beyond the feeling she got staring up at Aleksander. She hardly ever danced with anyone else, mostly Grisha in her husband’s inner circle, or her own. Last year young Casimir had asked and she couldn’t deny him one dance—her boy was just shy of eighteen and by Grisha standards a man now. He had his own workshop, supervised by David Kostyk himself, and a sweetheart of sorts in one of the etherealki who he would not reveal to her.

Stroking the surface of the pearl in her hand she recalled Casimir's bright hazel eyes sparkling in the late summer twilight.

"Madraya, may I have this dance?" his voice no longer broke, and his beloved mustache was no longer patchy on his lip. Aleksander had relinquished her hand with a kiss and a stern look at Casimir. Even then her husband did not let her feet touch the floor.

"Will you save a dance for an old man, my dear?" Aleksander's voice drew her out of her memories. He had his hands around hers, steady and something she could always draw strength from. She almost wished she could feel the power that Ivan said was under Sasha's skin. How would it feel? Like a summer day with the sun beating down on them? Cool, and calming, like his shadows? Or a fall breeze disturbing the fog?

"I'll always save a dance for you, Sasha," she said, hoping he didn't notice her sway on her feet a moment. Chancing a look up at him—

"Alya," he fit a dozen questions and admonishments into her name and Alina tried to ignore them. She wanted today to be as perfect as possible, and part of that was shrugging off Aleksander's fretting. He had known what he was getting into when he married her, he knew he might not even be gray haired when she died—Alina had wanted more time, too, had wanted a lot of things but she would have to make do with what she had now. Casimir, Anastasia, Oleg, Sofia—all the other children that were not her blood but who her husband had nonetheless given to her. Aleksander and his fussy ways, his way of speaking that had people stopping to *listen* to him. Who always made time for her. *Do not let yourself wither over a man who regrets his choices*, Ana Kuya had said. So Alina wouldn't.

"Peace, tonight. You can grouch at me tomorrow if you must. Tonight though, dance with me," she grinned up at him and Aleksander sighed, visibly upset, but he nodded and let her have her way. She let him put the necklace on her, admiring the sheen of the pearl in the sunlight. She had many pearls, but this one was singular—just faintly pink, as big as a grape, and set with silver clips on a fine silver chain.

Despite the rest of the day becoming a trial—really, any other day she would have been in bed hugging the hot water bottle that Sofia had made for her. Her husband was true to his implied promise to leave his nagging until the morrow. He got her to eat, he danced with her half the night, he kept the few guests from court from bothering her, and he made sure all of her little ones got a chance to kiss her cheek before Anton and Zenaida shepherded them off to bed.

She paid for her night of fun dearly.

The next day she could hardly move, her body on fire, her eyes swollen and too sensitive for even the dimmest of lights. It hurt to cry but she still did. Aleksander put off his day's appointments to tend to her himself, keeping the summer sun out of the room and bringing cool cloths to lay over her forehead. He still didn't say a word—no censure, no 'I told you so,' only sympathy. It made fresh tears fall from her eyes. How did anyone fear a man capable of this? She *knew* but times like this made her doubt.

After that day, though, Alina's fragile health completely unraveled. She started to have sleepless nights, made all the worse by often being confined to their bed. Before she would go look in on newer arrivals, ensure that they were not alone if they were awake late at night. Sometimes she would go sit with Aleksander if he was burning the midnight oil, or steal down to the kitchens to debate with the bakers about what was *truly* peasant food these days. Now though—it was either nights of freezing fits or her entire body being consumed by dangerously high fevers.

She could barely eat, and it hurt to move more often than not.

Genya sat with her often, when Aleksander was away, reading letters the children wanted to give her, and writing down short replies to the notes. Alina had not felt so isolated and miserable since she had been a tiny orphan with the wrong sort of face. So when Aleksander asked if she would start coming with him, around Ravka to the front in the South, to the *still* uneasy border with Fjerda, to the troubled edge of the Fold, she jumped at the chance. Alina had no idea how long she still had—no one, not even Ivan, would say it—but she knew she was dying. Aleksander knew it too, but he refused to look away. To tuck her in the attic and romance another woman. He held her at night, his own tears and grief dampening her hair, but he saw she had every comfort he could think of. If Alina needed warmth he built the fire high. If she burned with fever he ensured that her food and drink were cool or cold to keep her temperature under control. When it hurt to truly rest her weight on *anything* he summoned shadows that bent under her weight but did not leave her in agony.

She had good days, of course, such as the day Oleg brought her out to see what he and the other youths of the Little Palace had done with her garden—expanded now to include a hot house, with Sofia and Casimir's help. There were also the days she spent in the carriage, sketching the Ravka she saw through the curtains. Aleksander often rode alongside the carriage, chatting with her over the rumble of the wheels through the open window.

Genya announced her engagement to David on one of Alina's good days—and the two of them spent much of the day conspiring together. Alina demanded that Aleksander give his permission and that he let them have as grand a wedding day he could. Aleksander had seemed helpless to her demand, giving in without a hint of a fuss.

Alina was bedridden the day of the wedding, too weak to stand, and had to have Aleksander prop her up on the headboard of her bed when Genya and David came to sit with her. Genya's voice, quiet but still excited, lulled her to sleep not long after. Everyone began to close ranks around her after that day, protecting her even more fiercely than ever before and desperately trying to solve Madam Kirigan's mystery illness.

And then there was the trip to the Fold—through it, really—demanded of them by the tsar. Vasily had not grown to be a good ruler, nor had he even come close to surpassing the meager talent his father Pyotr had had, and his General of the First Army knew it. Viktor Zlatan was the grandson of a Kerch trader who kept a mistress in Os Kervo. The old man made sure his bastard daughter married well, and had had his grandson given the finest education to be had...in Ketterdam. There, Zlatan had learned of politics and of revolutions. He had kept this knowledge secret twenty five years ago when he joined the army as a lieutenant, but his views were no secret any longer. Vasily wanted him *taken care of* and so sent his other

general, his *loyal* General Kirigan to strip Zlatan of command. It was not a mission anyone believed would succeed.

Alina wondered, trying to go to sleep next to Aleksander, the night they arrived in Kribirsk, if she could even survive another two journeys through the Fold. Aleksander had said he would have to be *muted* by Ivan if they were to make it through without the volcra descending on them. The way he said it made it clear he had done it before, but it sent awful chills down her back. She had been sick for nearly a year after the essentially failed crossing of her childhood. What would it do to her now in her withered state?

The questions were still on her mind the next day as she picked her way alongside Aleksander through the Grisha camp—when she heard the spy scream at them in Fjerdan. She heard the pistol cock, the barrel reel, and had not given her actions a thought before diving in front of Aleksander. He had always known he would lose her, probably counted on it, but *she* would not lose *him*. She was not strong enough to, Saints help her.

The *pain* of the first shot had her seeing stars, but the second one was so much worse—her whole body felt aflame, burning everywhere.

She didn't know how long it was before she saw Aleksander's face above her. There were tears in his eyes and she wanted to apologize for leaving him this way when she heard, muted as though behind a door, *sun summoner* and her heart broke. He hadn't ever wanted *her* had he? He had been in such a hurry to marry her but—no, he would not have done that. He made decisions like that, and he did not mind waiting for his plans to come to fruition, but—he was talking, his face lit up with the light of a thousand candles reflected back at him, the bright daylight behind him darkening in comparison. Did she know? Alina tried to focus, to answer him.

"No," she managed to say, "I never—it would have appeared—" how many surprise little bumps and scrapes over the years? How many knicks of Grisha steel as she cut yarrow and mallow and reeds each year? Wasn't that how—?

Aleksander seemed to know all her questions, her confusion. *Saints* it hurt, she could *feel* her bones slither under her skin, trailing sparks and fire as the healers worked on saving her.

"Not always, my dear, *my dearest*, not always," he said, the tears pooled in his eyes spilling down his cheeks, crystalline in the bright light. He winced when she couldn't keep quiet about the pain—she tried not to listen to the healers, it would only frighten her, she already knew. Alina's eyes drifted, unable to focus, until Aleksander brought her hand up to kiss her fingers, saying sweet things. Staring up at her husband Alina couldn't help but ask—

"Did—did you know? Sasha?" she fought a heavy feeling of sleep, of death maybe even, wanting more time. Wanting answers to her questions. So many questions.

"No, my dear, not until today," he stroked her cheek, eyes still bright with tears, "you burned brightly even without the sun in your veins. Rest," how did he know the right thing to say, always? "Rest, I will stay right here." She fought to keep her eyes open, failing, hearing, "that's my girl," and no more.

Alina drifted and saw different futures—and all her pasts. Aleksander's face, hard, gaunt with exhaustion and guilt, turning away from her. Casimir and Petya, Anastasia and Viktor—all children again and looking at her with curious fear. Screams, and the strangle hotcold of the Fold. The frantic weeping of the squaller as she had pushed all her power at the tattered sail, ignoring Alina's crying as she clung to a silken pant leg. The gentle way that Aleksander had held her when they'd first lain together. Baghra pointing at her and screaming what a fool she was. Mal visiting the Little Palace years ago—as out of place as Ana Kuya's fine tea pot from Shu Han had been on her little parlor table as she'd spoken of besotted men and Alina making her own happiness. The pain of her long illness. The desolation that losing her was causing Aleksander, who knew better than to think he could keep her—no, *no*. Alina fought the pain filled drifting darkness—she would not leave him. He was not foolish for caring. And neither was she—

"Madam Kirigan, *Alina*," Ivan's voice, sure and low, washed over her. Alina whimpered at the wrongness that healing always left on her soul, but Ivan's hand rested on top of hers and she fought to open her eyes.

"Never thought you'd do that to escape the Grisha, *moya soverenna*," he muttered, motioning for someone to fetch him something, "it will not work again. I will be ready."

"As stern as cake," she rasped, teasing him.

"Come now, at least say marzipan, *Alina*," he replied, as close to pouting as he ever got. She wished Fedyor was there to gloat—tears pricked her eyes suddenly, and she wanted Sasha.

"Where is he?"

"Cleaning up the mess that that druskelle made, speaking with First Army, you know the rest. A million things."

"I do," she whispered, her eyes half-closed until Ivan's minion returned with a tray and set it beside where Ivan sat.

"No. I will throw up, I swear I will," she nearly growled, narrowing her eyes at him. Vanya appeared then, a decanter of his honeyed lemon water in his hand, his face more visibly worried than Ivan's. The difference between a healer and a heartrender.

"You will not, you need your strength. We taxed your bones heavily to heal you, *moya soverenna*," Vanya said, filling a mug with water and setting it on Ivan's tray. She felt sick just looking at the food—a thick stew, a large hunk of bread, and several apples. It was more solid food than she'd eaten in weeks if not a month. Vanya would have let her try and fail to finish the bread. He ensured she took in broths and teas infused with honey, sugar, oil, and salt to keep her going, but Ivan *never* let her get away with not eating.

"This isn't fair."

"This is healing," Vanya stated, setting the decanter on Aleksander's desk. It would appear Vanya's soft ways had finally found their limit with her poor health and he had sided with Ivan. He busied himself with cleaning up his kit, from what she could see, and organizing it

again. It had been torn through, obviously, as he and the other healers worked hard to save her. Of course they would have done that to save the sun summoner—Aleksander would have been out for blood if they'd lost the long awaited sun summoner to a couple of bullets from a Fjerdan assassin. Alina felt small and invisible against the idea of the sun summoner, feeling in her heart that if she hadn't been—

"Moya soverenna, do not think such dark things. Eat," Ivan insisted, now leaning in with a spoonful of stew like she was a child. It was good of him, she felt as weak as a kitten. With his hands both occupied she knew he was not using his gift on her, so she begrudgingly let him help her. Ivan was patient, each bite neither too much nor too little, and he never spilled even a drop between the bowl and her lips. The bread was fresh, a certain internal humidity escaping as she chewed every bite. Her body did not seem able to decide to be sick or to settle, the will-you-won't-you of it all making it difficult to soldier on through the last morsels. The fruit they shared, each man taking an apple, Vanya cutting one up for Alina as Ivan very gently examined her heart rate and function, reporting his findings to Vanya in a relieved voice. The apple was difficult, but she managed to finish one. Ivan knew he was out of luck from the look she threw at him and did not press her to try more, beyond drinking Vanya's specialty water. She winced at the particularly strong brew, it had more lemon, salt and honey than normal.

She wasn't sure when she fell asleep, but it was with Ivan's unwavering gaze on her and her hand clasped in his. She could feel his gift slipping around in her chest, checking on her as he had done more and more over the last year.

The next thing Alina knew was that Sasha was back. She opened her eyes, groggy from Ivan no doubt keeping her at rest, and saw only Ivan, Vanya, and another healer. A dream then—

And then the flap of the tent opened and there he was. Haggard—*gaunt with exhaustion and—no, yes—no—and with guilt*—but whole. The assassin had not touched him. Her Sasha, her Aleksander.

"Sasha," she said, once they were alone, taking his hand and kissing his palm. His hand was cold against her lips.

"Alina, my dearest. I am glad you're alright. Have you been awake long?"

Not wanting to worry him she omitted the tiny truth of half-passing out from exhaustion, and also wanting to get some sympathy—to be *Sasha's Alina* for just a little longer, not the mythical sun summoner. She was still so tired, too.

"Not long, Ivan made them ply me with stew. He insisted I eat a whole bowl, and what felt like an entire loaf of bread, and then an apple. If I am sick later make sure it lands on his boots," she fibbed on the *who* because she could, she pouted because everything still hurt and was too proud to tell that to Aleksander. It sent him to dark places if she spoke too much of pain and exhaustion. He still *saw* everything, though.

"How do you feel? Aside from trying to keep down your food?" he was trying at a touch of humor, but he wasn't doing a great job of using it to hide his worry. Alina chose to ignore his question, instead choosing to ask a painful one of her own. She had to know. Whatever else,

if he had known she would never forgive him. Aleksander clenched his teeth together and Alina could forgive his *reticence* at least, and she implored him—"Sasha, tell me."

When he made the sunlight flood out of her she felt so *right*. Healing and other powers had always felt like they didn't belong when she brushed against them. But this felt like his shadows did when he summoned them to close around her. Natural. Wanted. Easy.

His hand on her cheek was so warm now.

"I called like this," a stroke of his thumb on her cheek, "on our wedding day and nothing came. I married *you*, Alina, that day, not the sun summoner. I thought I would have you for four or five decades. I..." he seemed to fight for words, tears in his eyes—*gaunt in the darkness and turning away, eyes reddened with unshed tears*—"I accepted that. I knew I would see you cold in your grave, that we would not grow old together. I didn't *want* that, but I accepted it."

"And now?" what did he make of the tears in *her* eyes? He seemed caught in a spell, unable to look away. Like she would get up off the bed and leave him of her own free will.

"Now I must tell you things I've kept from you. Grisha nonsense." His attempt at levity didn't fall flat so much as alarm her. His next words filled her with a kind of creeping dread she had never encountered with him: "but also some things about me that no one knows, not even you my dear. Now, I get to keep you, hopefully," his tone told her he had none, "which has been a fond wish of mine for some time."

He started off with a simple truth: Baghra was his mother. Alina ached that that old crone had raised Aleksander—a vile old woman filled with venom and vinegar, who after more than ten years *still* hated Alina. Another truth her beloved gave her—he had been Grisha-wed ten times, had outlived nine spouses, and had expected to be forced to bury Alina too. *Ten* times married.

A face from a nightmare greeted her, out of the depths of her sudden despair—a week's shadow of a beard, long hair hanging lank, hungry eyes—Alina pushed it away, but the spectre did not go. Instead features filled in—full lips, a strong nose, straight teeth bared in anger, black eyes sparkling with it. *Aleksander*. But not her Sergei Aleksander Kirigan. No. Alina waited for him to say it, so she did not have to taste it first, or roll her mouth over the words.

"Alina, it was me. I made it. The Fold. It was not—it was not an accident, not a mistake, not an attack, not a symbol of how I saw Ravka. The tsar's soldiers came for us, I tried—I succeeded—in using merzost to turn them into monsters. But the human will is a strong thing to fully overcome let alone master, and I was only one man against the will of a hundred. I called on more power, letting it lick up my soul like fire on kindling, to fight them, but I lost control of it. And them. I turned my own Grisha, cowering in the cellars or running through the woods, into monsters too." She was sobbing, unable to get a full breath, because she *felt* it all as he said it. The rage at being betrayed by a king he'd grown to look up to—thinking the man wise beyond his years, a savior for the Grisha of Ravka. His fear for his people and what would become of them, his dread that his mother was right, his grief for a lover not even settled in her grave—his fury that she had been buried, not burned as was proper—and most

of all his resolve. Nothing came to save him, not even himself. He had *resolved* to wait for a sun summoner, to search for one, to use their power to retake control of the merzost—to tame it and use it to control the Fold as well as its monsters.

And then he told her: he could not even think of doing that now, not when it would mean controlling and subjugating *Alina* herself. It was a weak wake-up call, not one that was selfless or saint-like, but that he had done so at all, had decided on his own, was enough. Perfection could not be the altar upon which to sacrifice more lives pursuing a goal made unachievable long before Aleksander had even lived. People had hated Grisha before even his mother had been born. Alina chose to take it at face value, to clutch it close to her heart with her love for him and her hope for the future.

Just as with her decision to accept his contrition, his explanations, Alina also decided to help him—by taking down the Fold. It took some time to compose herself, but he waited for her, curled up in bed against Alina as though he could shield her from it all with his body, his heart, his soul.

“Let’s bring down the Fold, tomorrow,” she told him, half-afraid of what he would say or do—she felt her Aleksander, her Sasha, would do it. But Aleksander *Morozova*, the Black Heretic of myth and fable? Her husband was frozen for a horrible moment but then he kissed her hair, pressed his cheek to the crown of her head. Slowly the tension in his body changed—less like he would flee and more like he was waiting for a blow. Alina rushed to explain herself—

“You just have to take it back. What you fed the,” she cast about for the right phrases, to show she’d listened, had *heard* him. Heard his fears, old, ancient, and new. His fear was maybe as old as the world itself, “the merzost with. You said you only needed...me, if you want to *control* it, but I think you could also undo it, if I was there to keep you safe. Please Sasha?”

“How do I keep—how do *we* keep them from harming Grisha? Ravka is only barely better than other places in the world, you know that, and—and trying to make a country of only Grisha isn’t possible. Grisha have otkazat’sya children more often than they pass on their powers. Whatever we did could be—”

Alina curled closer to him, laying a hand at his neck, feeling his panic race through his blood, stroked his jaw to soothe him.

“Aleksander, we have time to figure that out. You haven’t figured it out in—”four hundred years, more if he was to be believed, “in this long, I can’t solve all your problems just by existing, by being a sun summoner, but I will be here. I will help you.”

“Why the urgency?” he had a funny look on his face, like he heard a conversation she could not. She prayed he saw things the same as she did, or could at least be *made* to see them that way.

“Taking it down so soon after discovering the sun summoner means Vasily cannot decide how to hold it over your head that you accidentally married the sun summoner. Whatever anger he may have for you ‘hiding’ me cannot be shown publicly when your next decision

was to reunite Ravka. He also can't dither long enough for Fjerda and Shu Han to decide that they're going to do about...me. Also, imagine the fallout with the peasantry for punishing the sun summoner and her husband for destroying the Fold. Even Vasily is not that stupid, though he might surprise us yet."

Sasha managed a laugh, looking less haggard for a moment, and then kissed her like he often did, like her kiss gave him life itself, and teased her for her treason. An old game, from the scant weeks of their courting and early marriage, that they still played sometimes. It was a bit of wickedness and fun.

"Well, how do we do this then?"

Alina knew it would have to be a spectacle. Not one with the hands of Vasily or the Apparat all over it. It had to be a sight that all who saw it had to acknowledge was Grisha through and through. Sasha was afraid, as he only ever let her see, and their arguments stemmed from his fear. He had lived as an immortal for so long that all her beloved could see were the ripples of old, ancient, decisions, turning into choppy seas as the years went on. Every move calculated with an eye seeing a century ahead. For her own part in their arguments she had already faced her death. The long malaise had been killing her, and she had taken two bullets to the chest, knowing the sacrifice would be more than worth it—although now, privately, Alina wondered if she could share the long life that Aleksander had, her Grisha gift now perhaps able to pause or slow the clock on her mortality.

The answer they arrived at was that she was right—they had to act now before the tsar could stop them or ruin things, they had to make a uniquely Grisha spectacle, and they most of all had to *try*.

Three Fabrikators worked tirelessly to make a silver veil for Alina. The design was extravagant but the whorls and knots of the lace were placed to exaggerate the light Alina shed when Aleksander called on her power. Another Fabrikator affixed pearls—ones Alina volunteered from the jewelry box she'd been bullied into bringing by Genya—to one of Aleksander's spare keftas. He had wanted a yellow one, with golden embroidery and diamonds, sent for but there was no time. The pearls shimmered in her sunlight and she was sure that the kefta—too long on her, the silhouette striking because of how it cinched at her waist but broadened the look of her shoulders and widened her hips—would be her favorite until it fell to pieces. If they lived this would be the kefta would be known as the one she wore when her husband brought down the Fold. When *they* brought down the Fold, she reminded herself, as they walked towards it two days after she'd been shot. She held onto Aleksander's hand for dear life, taking an obscene amount of comfort in both him and the sunlight he helped her find in herself.

Together they led the Grisha of Kribirsk into the Fold. As they walked she tried to think of something inspiring to say. She had been at a loss for days, and she had never really been the one to make speeches or grand announcements. Her life in the Little Palace did not generally require that she be *impressive* but Aleksander made a point that she needed to be the one to speak now. *No one ever wants to hear from the shadow summoner*, he had said years before.

"We are Grisha," it felt so strange to call herself Grisha, having been a beloved outsider for so long, "we make things, we aren't fighters. We don't know what tearing down the Fold will

do to the General and I, because we are not conquering it, we are removing it, but we will face it together. Light cannot fully destroy darkness, just as darkness cannot fully engulf light.” She sucked in a deep breath as she finished speaking. Aleksander squeezed her hand and lifted her short veil from her face, and she quickly took his face in her palms. He had explained the theory to her—he had *made* and *poured out* when he had worked the merzost four hundred years before. He now needed to swallow his pride and *take back* and *unmake*. Alina trusted him to do it. She believed in him.

She kept her eyes on his, not flinching when the merzost crawled through his veins, spreading black and horrible across his skin—she didn’t flinch went her own power roared out of her, consuming every scrap it could from the bounty in Aleksander. She did the best she could to wipe the tears from his cheeks. He croaked each breath in and out like it was choking him. He had told her to *take* until the merzost receded, until he stopped pouring out power. Sasha had said it would be better if she could summon on her own, but that this did not require skill. To glow in her own light, feeding off his darkness.

Alina let herself cry, because there were still so many things to fix, to solve, to forgive, to fight about. She had not set out to be some savior—the most she had wanted was a spouse who loved her. A family. A place in the world of her own. Life as a general’s wife had already been far and away more than she had dreamed of, in terms of prominence, expectation, and a kind of borrowed power that being married gave a person. Now she was the sun summoner, married to the shadow summoner.

Aleksander started screaming when the merzost overtook all his face and Alina tried her best to draw more power out of him. *Don’t touch my bones, only what offers itself up, what seeks you*, she didn’t quite understand what he meant this morning but she focused only on what welled up out of him—like blood from a wound. The dark raced into him and the light raced out of her. Alina felt faint, barely holding on, when finally color bled back into Sasha’s face again—she did not know how long it took, but she focused her eyes, blinking in the against the bright daylight. They knelt together in the dead sand of what had been the Fold.

“Thank the Saints,” Sasha mumbled, falling face first to her, his head cradled at her breast. The sudden absence of his power left her dizzy—some, a minuscule amount in comparison, remained but Alina avoided drawing on it. Without it, though, she couldn’t support their combined weight and she collapsed in a heap with Aleksander.

She woke in his arms—later. Aleksander was awake, reading what looked like a letter written on the tsar’s stationery.

“Is that what I think it is?” she asked, her voice hoarse and thready.

“What do you think it is, Alya?” she said nothing, only rested her head on his chest, chasing sleep. He hummed a tune, stroking her hair, and she was able to close her eyes again and sleep. The next time she awoke he was gone, a note on his pillow and Ivan left reading a book across the tent from her.

“Where is he?”

“Meeting with the man who killed General Zlatan—Lieutenant General Stepanov, he is calling himself. He has Fedyor with him, but I said you ought not wake alone.” She knew where this was going.

“More stew then?” Ivan cracked a smile, closing his book and calling for one of the oprichniki to send for something to eat.

“Take heart, Madam Kirigan, it might not be stew,” he said, taking a seat next to her.

“He *killed* Zlatan? What is he doing here? How do you know you can trust him?”

“He led the rebellion when Zlatan declared he would make himself the tsar of all Ravka with the Fold destroyed. A humble mapmaker who made friends with the right people at the right time put an end to him. He didn’t lie when he said he shot Zlatan himself and that he comes in peace to us.”

“Still—”

“He is married to an alkemi, had to keep her gift a secret so Zlatan didn’t have her disappeared, so I think he may have similar goals to General Kirigan. He greeted the General as the night summoner, which is what First Army have started calling him.”

“Night?”

“To match the sun,” Ivan said, turning to mutter a quiet thanks to the oprichnik who brought in a tray laden with porridge, fruit, and tea.

They ate quietly, Alina mercifully strong enough to feed herself this time. Ivan told her how long she’d slept—a week—and all she’d missed. The tsar had written and earned himself an enemy, a real one, by demanding Aleksander give Alina to the Crown. It was one of the reasons why Sasha was meeting with this Lieutenant General Stepanov—the man had the loyalty of West Ravka.

Aleksander returned after a few hours and sank down to kneel at her side. He looked tired, but not run ragged or like he wanted to turn away from her in shame like he had been doing in her dreams.

“How are you?” he held her hand, kissing her knuckles and fixing his dark eyes on hers.

“I feel weak, but not sick. Does that make sense?”

“A bit. Will you let me call your light? We have a guest who would like to meet you later, who is very in awe of the both of us.”

“Lieutenant General Stepanov?”

“For now,” he said with a dim smile that didn’t reach his eyes.

“Sasha.”

Aleksander had disagreed with her, what seemed a lifetime ago, when they plotted to take down the Fold. He wished to rid the country of the Lantsovs and their rule. Alina thought it would cause too much upheaval in too short a time and cost them more than they could gain by it.

“What did you do, Sasha?”

He had the good grace to grimace a smidge.

“He was...not pleased when I told him of what the tsar had planned for you.”

“I heard, Ivan told me.”

“For a cartographer he is fairly astute. Notices things and files them away. You’ll like him I think.”

Aleksander was obviously hoping she would forget her actual line of questioning.

“Sasha, what did you mean by *for now*. I won’t stop asking, I’ll ask him if I have to.”

“He has the momentum of West Ravka behind him,” her husband eventually sighed, “his position is delicate, he killed Zlatan because Zlatan was going to make himself tsar and sell Grisha to fill his coffers. Stepanov’s wife is Grisha. West Ravka still hungers for freedom from Os Alta, from the Lantsovs. Now—he has a good reason to supplant the Lantsovs, one that Zlatan would have squandered, on top of his own faction’s power. He is confident that if we make the tsar’s audacity known to those in West Ravka they will support overthrowing the tsar.”

“And make you tsar?” Sasha, we talked about this—”

“Him. He has the army, he supports us, he obviously cares for Grisha beyond just his wife. You were right, still are, that Ravka doesn’t need an immortal tsar, but that doesn’t mean I’m wrong that we need a change.” Lieutenant General Stepanov had been a senior cartographer eight days ago. A rebel six days ago. And now the leader of West Ravka as of five days ago. It was a rule in its very infancy, and infants sometimes did not live long—especially without being nurtured.

Alina was not sure she had really expected a slight man with a clean shaven face, upon meeting the Lieutenant General. He was about her age, she might have even served with him if the army had been willing to take her all those years ago.

“Madam Kirigan,” he said crisply with a bow when she entered his tent on Aleksander’s arm that evening.

“Lieutenant General Stepanov,” she replied with a nod. Grisha did not curtsy, so she had long ago dispensed with it in her daily life at the Little Palace. No matter that this was potentially the new tsar. Stepanov’s smile was warm, and he excitedly made the introduction of his own wife, a blonde woman who looked like she’d only recently started sleeping well. Alina could relate to the feeling, in a way.

“I—it is a terrible thing to ask, but will you help us? There is a chance for a new Ravka, but we must act. I must seem—I must seem as bloodthirsty and low as they come but our window of opportunity is small. We can make a Ravka where Grisha are safe. Where the West does not resent the East. Where the East is not starved and being slowly choked by the eagles of Os Alta. I never meant to be a revolutionary—”

Alina held up a hand stopping him and his speech. She now saw what hope he had, but also what her Sasha had seen in him.

“My husband told me long ago to never apologize for what you are, moi tsar, for the world will never accept the apology.” The tension in the room flooded out as the sun summoner gave permission for their plans without ever saying out loud that that was what she was talking about. Alina knew there was still a war—two, maybe even three wars, really—to fight and win, and it would take a long time to do that, but she also reveled in the heady possibilities. To the point where that night she told Aleksander what she wanted of him when all this was done.

“Now that—that I might last to your old age, I want to live part of the year in the country. I want to have at least a few children. I want to see the True Sea.”

“Is that all you want? Eternity is a long road to walk my love.”

“That’s true, but I have you to walk at my side for the time I have. The only night summoner, my own husband,” she teased, kissing him and stroking his cheek. He had stars in his eyes, he looked so in awe as he stared at her in the dimness of their tent.

“So you do, sun summoner. Alina. My dear. So you do.”

## Chapter End Notes

Okay. Finally. It's done. I hardly set out for three chapters, I was worried it would soon morph into four, but here we are. Done. Let me know what you thought of this, I literally poured my soul out in most of a journal notebook on my lunch hours for the last several weeks. This ship, this fandom, everything just completely stole me. So let me know what you thought of this, I appreciate you all!

## End Notes

I know I dove into this fandom without talking to anyone or making any friends but I hope that you enjoyed this. So please let me know what you think!

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!